IDEAS OF NATIONALITY IN ICELANDIC POETRY 1830-1874

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INTRODUCTION

On the 17th of June 1944 Iceland became a republic. Significantly the day was partly a remembrance of Jón Sigurðsson (1811-79), the most prominent politician of the nineteenth century. The official celebration was launched with a ceremony by his statue at Austurvöllur in the centre of Reykjavík. Later in the day more than twenty thousand people assembled at Þingvellir where the ancient Alþing had been established in the tenth century. Here the Prime Minister read the declaration of independence and added that the dream of many generations of Icelanders had at long last been achieved.

The way the Icelanders celebrated their first day of independence reflects ideas of nationality which originated in the previous century. Although poems and music were composed specifically for the occasion, the general rejoicing found outlet in the patriotic repertoire written in the nineteenth century. The "Iceland-poems", which evoke a love of the native tongue and the motherland and glorify the Golden Age of the Settlements and Commonwealth, were perfectly suited to the day. To these myths of the

early nationalists, the new Republic added its gratitude to the men who had begun the struggle for independence. Almost immediately after his death, Jón Sigurðsson became a national hero whose name was increasingly used as a symbol of a new future. In 1881 Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831-1913) wrote a poem where the national "awakening" is shown to be a testimony to Jón's life. Addressed to future generations the poem depicts a vision of a new age of prosperity and well-being for all. When the day dawns, he pleads, it must be remembered that "hvötin kom frá honum,/ Sem hverjum landa var í bróðurstað" (Ljóðmæli, p.35). In the twenties the novelist Halldór Laxness wrote an article about the poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45), whose poetry was widely regarded as synonymous with the national "awakening". In a tone that is supremely reverential, Laxness honours the poet: "Hann eignaðist gáfu ljóðsins, en þó er einginn fjær því en hann að lifa í ljóðsins heimi einsog guðirnir. Nei; þótt hann sé einn af skáldunum og einn af ástmögum guðanna, þá er hann umfram alt sonur dalsins, hinns íslenska dals sem minnist við hafið."[1]

Until very recently even scholarly evaluation of the period 1830 to 1874 has shown great respect, almost veneration for the work and character of figures such as Jón Sigurðsson and Jónas Hallgrímsson. A literary critic

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1 Halldór Laxness, Alþýðubókin (Reykjavík, 1955), p.59.

discussing Jónas's poetry points out the dangers of this attitude. He argues that although previous generations were justified in their lavish praise, such an approach produces "staðnaðar og máttlitlar hugmyndir."[2] Similarly the historian's interpretation of the period is no longer dominated by nationalistic sentiments. Yet the scope of nineteenth-century studies tends to reflect a disproportionate concern with political developments, which, in the context of this period, is coterminous with the struggle for national self-determination. The lack of interest in contemporary ideas and thought is exemplified in a handbook for students of history, written and compiled by Gunnar Karlsson, which does not even include the category hugmyndasaga.[3] Aspects of intellectual history are nevertheless covered in several books and articles, notably literary histories and the numerous studies of Fjölnir and its editors. More important in relation to ideas of nationality is the lack of a comprehensive work on Romantic influence in Iceland which coincided and merged with the national "awakening". There are several studies which throw light on the movement but these deal specifically with literature and usually concentrate on individual poets and narrow themes.

The labels "Enlightenment" and "Romanticism" are

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2 Hannes Pétursson, Kvæðafylgsni (Reykjavík, 1979), p.8.

3 Hvarstæða, Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar, 6 (Reykjavík, 1981).

widely used in Icelandic writing - particularly to classify the major poets from the mid-eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century - but often with justified reservations. In a recent work on literary currents and movements in Icelandic literature from 1550, Heimir Pálsson outlines the major problems in applying these terms in Iceland.[4] Understandably in a book dealing with more than four centuries, his analysis of Romanticism is broad-based. It concentrates primarily on isolating the main themes that are usually considered to characterise European Romantic literature and thought, and on evaluating the major Icelandic poets of the period within this framework. This inevitably leads to the traditional conclusion - presented in the literary histories of Stefán Einarsson and Richard Beck - that the Icelandic movement tended to be moderate and derivative, while following important stylistic and thematic trends characteristic of European Romanticism. Although this conclusion may be sound, the method undermines such unique features as may have been present in Icelandic Romanticism. By studying Icelandic literature from the inside, adopting an inductive rather than a deductive approach, one may discern in it a coherence and wider relevance than currently stipulated.

The recent and growing interest in new aspects of the past, notably the lives of women, trade unionism, and so forth, has not as yet made much impact on the historical

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4 Straumar og stefnur (Reykjavík, 1978), pp.83-120.

interpretation of the nineteenth century. A notable exception is Guðmundur Jónsson's published BA dissertation which deals with the economic and social conditions of servants.[5] Because of its bias towards political themes, the history of the period deals with a very small proportion of the population, the educated and the politically active. Perhaps inevitably historians have been more concerned with working-class ideas and movements in the twentieth century, when the trade unions began to develop political muscle, and for which sources are less scarce and fragmented than for earlier periods. Similarly literary history and criticism deal primarily with a narrow canon, the nature of which is succinctly summed up by Heimir Pálsson:

> Sé litið á þær bókmenntir sem venja er að velja til lestrar í íslenskum skólum, sést að úrvalið hefur undanfarna áratugi verið fremur þröngt í margvíslegum skilningi. Það er t.a.m. augljóst, að þar er venja að ganga fram hjá viðamiklum bókmenntagreinum eins og afþreyingarbókmenntum. Þar sést líka fljótt að hlutur menntaðra skálda af karlkyni er geysimikill, ekki síst um næstliðin 150 ár ... má óhætt fullyrða að þáttur íslenskrar alþýðu í bókmenntastarfi hafi jafnan verið of lítils metinn. 6

The established canon of nineteenth-century Icelandic poetry is to a large extent a legacy of Romanticism. The movement brought about a division within literature which depended to an important degree on a writer's educational background, reflected initially in subject-matter and style.

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5 Vinnuhjú á 19. öld, Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar, 5 (Reykjavík, 1981).

6 Straumar og stefnur, pp.88-9.

Literary critics rarely seem to question the nature of the canon or the way it developed. This is demonstrated in literary histories and criticism, notably in a recent doctoral thesis on Icelandic poetry from 1750 to 1930, which aims to "pursue a study of the causes and origins of the poems. The study is bound to be more concerned with the problems of intellectual and literary history than with those of literary analysis and evaluation. The contents of poems and the attitudes of poets are the primary objects, and questions of style and composition are only considered as far as they have special relevance to these."[7] Perhaps surprisingly, in a work which seeks to analyse the influences and social context in poetry dealing with foreign peoples and events, the author is confident about his selection: "such a selection is not likely to cause any serious problems; it can be assumed that most people will agree that Matthías Jochumsson and Einar Benediktsson should be included but Níels Skáldi, Símon Dalaskáld and Þorleifur Guðmundsson Repp not."[8] The consequence of this unquestioning acceptance of a rigid literary canon is that the work of the unschooled poets - with the notable exception of a few poems by Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1796-1846), Hjálmar Jónsson (1796-1875) and Páll Ólafsson (1827-1905) - is regarded as lying

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7 Eysteinn Sigurðsson, Contemporary Foreign Subject-matter in Icelandic Poetry ca. 1750-1930, unpublished thesis (University College London, 1978), p.17.

8 Ibid.

outside the academically respectable cultural tradition. The fundamental problem with this division is that no satisfactory justification has been offered as yet why the bulk of the poetry written in the nineteenth century should be regarded as unworthy of academic study.

Historical scholarship in the past may have suffered from the traditionally blurred distinction between the "folk scholar" and the interested amateur on the one hand, and the trained historian on the other. Yet this lack of a clear distinction between academic and non-academic scholarship is a remarkable aspect of historical study in Iceland. The former category has been particularly diligent in rescuing material about the lives of ordinary men and women, and a great deal of its work has been published. The approach of the "folk scholar" is primarily one of narrative and tends to concentrate on unusual events and characters - people who for one reason or another were well known in their localities. Even today this kind of material is common in periodicals and daily newspapers. The weekly succession of lengthy obituaries in the press is perhaps a reflection of the Icelanders' consuming interest in the past, especially genealogies, biographies and the like. By its very nature this kind of history is multi-disciplinary in that the "folk scholar" makes little distinction between cultural, economic and social history and literature. Any subject is tackled with equal optimism and in a style which is at the same time individual

and within an established tradition.

Icelandic history written in the nineteen-forties and fifties often adopts an approach that is both narrative and multi-disciplinary. This is a very pronounced characteristic of the series Saga Íslendinga (Reykjavík, 1942-58), still a widely-used textbook for the period 1500-1900. Although the individual volumes vary considerably in the standard of their scholarship, they all suffer from an over-extended range and a lack of serious analysis. Religion, government, education, literature, biographies and so on are all covered by the author of each volume. This mammoth undertaking is in more ways than one a remarkable achievement, but as historical scholarship it betrays serious weaknesses - particularly those volumes which also lack references and an index. Three textbooks written in the seventies, covering the same period as Saga Íslendinga, demonstrate the change in historical writing in Iceland. Here there is a serious attempt to observe strict rules of presentation; and they exemplify a new attitude as to what should be included in a book of general history. In Íslensk miðaldasaga (Reykjavík, 1978), Björn Þorsteinsson deals exclusively with political, economic and social history and discusses intellectual developments and ideas very briefly, and only in passing. In Frá einveldi til lýðveldis. Íslandssaga eftir 1830 (Reykjavík, 1973) Heimir Þorleifsson writes less than two pages on literature

and on the whole avoids intellectual or cultural ideas. Lýður Björnsson, writing about the period 1550-1830, draws even clearer lines and gives the reader considered reasons for excluding literature and ideas expressed in creative writing: "Orsök þessa er ekki skilningsleysi höfundar á mikilvægi bókmennta, honum er ljóst, að bókmenntir voru a.m.k. sumum landsmönnum 'ljós í lágu hreysi og langra kvelda jólaeldur', svo vitnað sé til orða skáldsins. Ég tel aftur á móti, að bókmenntafræðingar eigi að fjalla um þennan þátt Íslandssögu."[9] Here it is rightly stressed that literary history is a specialised field. At the same time the author appears to regard literature as relevant to the historian simply because it happens to have been read by someone in the past, or served to fill the empty hours of the Icelandic winter.

The main aim of this thesis is an attempt to show that Icelandic poetry written between 1830 and 1874 can provide important insights into cultural values and tensions that existed in the period. The main problems that have hitherto inhibited such a study stem from the fragmentary nature of secondary studies on ideas and thought, and from the difficulties involved in using poetry as a historical source. In 1860 the historian and poet, Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827-88), warned his readers

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9 Frá siðaskiptum til sjálfstæðisbaráttu, p.10.

not to draw firm conclusions about a poet's ideas and opinions from his work. "Skáldskapur", he claimed "verður æfinlega skáldskapur." [10] The conclusions that a historian can reasonably draw from creative writing are usually only speculative. Only occasionally can poetry - even genres such as the verse-letter - yield concrete evidence about the way people lived in the past. There are several exceptions to this in the work of the unschooled poets who were often particularly concerned with mundane details of their own circumstances. For example, the crofter Einar Jónsson (1802-60), taking stock of his property in this poem:

> Stend ég einn, á Stakahjalla,
> stórviðrin mér þar ei falla;
> verða tíðum verkin smá.
> Við mínar ær, ég má við lalla
> margt er erfitt upp til fjalla,
> reynslan kennir rétt að sjá.
> Á ég 17 ær með lömbum,
> efst mitt uppá fjallakömbum,
> lúra þær tvær þó lamblausar,
> fjóra sauði og sex gemlinga,
> söðlaljónið kosta ringa;
> skil eg frá því skuldirnar.
>
> (Lbs. 2219, 8vo.)

Identical information about the livestock of a small crofter could almost certainly be gleaned from probate records or documents of a similar nature. Yet these would not give any indication of the attitudes that even a simple poem such as this can convey. It reflects sentiments that are expressed in numerous poems by poor farmer-poets during this period: a combination of pride in property and independence and a sense of the precariousness of life.

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10 Benedikt Gröndal, Gísli Brynjúlfsson, Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, Svava (Copenhagen, 1860), p.iii.

This is highlighted by the proud, but perhaps intentionally ambiguous beginning, "Stend ég einn". Although poetry of this nature rarely employs sophisticated poetic devices - except for complex alliteration and rhyme - it nonetheless has a purpose. Here, for example, the poem appears to be an inventory not simply of material goods but also a balance sheet of what life can offer to the crofter. Einar began adult life as a simple farmhand, but achieved independence in his forties by becoming a tenant of a small hill farm. This change probably brought no improvement in Einar's standard of living, but nevertheless may have altered his social status marginally. The fact that he wrote the poem at all suggests that such a change was profoundly important in Icelandic society.

To go beyond subject-matter to attitudes, values and ideas leads to a consideration of language, stylistic devices and literary objectives. It may be argued that poetry which is above all a simple expression of direct responses to an event or circumstances cannot yield much beyond what appears absolutely obvious on a first reading. This problem is discussed by Richard Hoggart in a recent article on cultural studies. He argues that by a close analysis it is possible to assess what he calls "cultural meanings" in all kinds of literature, including "low" or mass writing. He emphasises the need to look methodically at any work for passages and scenes which reflect coherent ideas. The purpose of a close

reading of what seems initially insignificant and easily grasped is to distinguish intrinsic cultural values from the superficial pressures that popular literature tends to encounter. This, he argues "is the first crucial gain from a full reading. Otherwise, one might just as well simply count references, cross-tabulate and generally make elaborate quantitative manouvres with them. The aim is to find eventually what field of values is embodied, reflected or resisted, within the work."[11] Hoggart's stress on a close reading and an awareness of the social and cultural pressures on "low" or mass literature, illuminates the problems involved in a study of poetry written in a given period. To understand how or why Icelandic poets thought about nationality in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to disregard quality in order to achieve a representative selection. Such a selection inevitably includes poems written in a style outmoded at the time, as well as work which is purely derivative and without skill. Unlike the poems which belong to the established canon, this selection cannot be evaluated solely by literary criticism. Since the main object of the historian is to understand the society in which the writer lived, his analysis must include a sympathetic appreciation of the circumstances and the emotions which created a particular work, regardless of its quality.

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11 Richard Hoggart, "Contemporary Cultural Studies: An Approach to the Study of Literature and Society", in Contemporary Criticism, eds. M.Bradbury and D.Palmer (London, 1979), p.161.

In his dissertation on the conditions of the nineteenth-century servant, Guðmundur Jónsson points out that "fáar samtímaheimildir eru til um vinnufólk og enn síður heimildir frá því sjálfu."[12] It is indeed true that Iceland is no different from other countries in that the greatest proportion of its historical evidence comes from a vocal minority. Yet the ordinary Icelander of the period considered poetry as a natural media to voice his grievances and pleasure. Thus the relatively large quantity of poems written by unschooled people represents a unique source for the historian. What is particularly unusual about this poetry is that much of it originated as written rather than oral literature. Many unschooled poets saw themselves as committed writers, although only a very small minority expected material gain from their labours. It is probable that this attitude stemmed from the traditional role of poetry as a popular pastime and entertainment for all social groups, and from the fact that there was little distinction between learned poetry and versemaking. Furthermore, poetry was clearly an important media for serious social and religious thought. The Icelanders' notions of poetry depended primarily on their high literacy, which is estimated - perhaps optimistically - to have been almost universal by the end of the eighteenth century. The evidence in the present study suggests, moreover, that many Icelanders were diligent

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12 Vinnuhjú á 19. öld. p.7.

It could be argued that poetry is an unreliable historical source because poets are exceptional people, unrepresentative of the population at large or the social class they belong to. It is nevertheless reasonable to assume that their social and educational background has at least some influence on their work, and that they consequently voice problems, emotions and attitudes which are relevant to an understanding of the tensions and cohesive forces in contemporary society. Moreover, in the period 1830 to 1874 poets were numerically an unusually large segment of the Icelandic population. Although they were often singled out by their contemporaries as masters of a valued craft - or in some cases as artists - this rarely brought them greater social or economic status. Well known local poets were sometimes rewarded for writing obituaries or verse-letters - which were frequently commissioned. Yet Sigurður Breiðfjörð was probably the only contemporary poet who made a significant profit from writing poetry, namely rímur.

The work of nearly fifty unschooled poets has been used in this study. Of these, a fifth were servants, fishermen or itinerant people who never farmed independently. Many of the farmers were small crofters who worked for a period as farmhands before acquiring land of their own. Often, however, these people ended their lives as recipients of parish assistance. This selection represents only a small percentage of the people who

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have left some poetry in manuscript, and does not include the numerous poets who wrote mainly rímur. The study includes thirty educated poets, the majority of whom were clergymen.[14] A few of these had grammar school education but subsequently became farmers or assistants to crown officials. The handful of Danish-educated poets figure extensively because of their relative importance as a literary élite who established a new taste in literature and a novel style of writing.

In Vinnuhjú á 19.öld Guðmundur Jónsson suggests that "Fátt bendir til þess að samkennd, hvað þá stéttarvitund, hafi verið til að dreifa hjá vinnuhjúum. Þau voru því aðeins 'stétt í sjálfur sér', en ekki 'stétt fyrir sjálfa sig' svo notuð séu hugtök Karls Marx" (p.79). Contemporary poetry belies the view that the nineteenth-century servant was unaware of belonging to a separate "class". Yet his consciousness was too dynamic and fluid to fit neatly into a Marxist framework. Poetry suggests a presence of feeling among the lower orders which could be loosely termed samkennd and was reflected primarily in an acceptance of social hierarchy. Although social divisions were undoubtedly less obvious in Iceland than in larger countries, notions of hierarchy were ingrained in the culture. This is conveyed in different kinds of writing, notably in the titles of two reading primers for children.

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14 In the period there were around one hundred and eighty serving clergymen in Iceland.

In 1830 Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag published Lestrarkver handa heldri manna börnum, and twenty-three years later the editor of Ingólfur wrote Nýtt stafrófskver handa minni manna börnum. This broad division into "greater" and "lesser" men corresponds almost exactly to contemporary ideas of social class. The "greater" men were almost exclusively educated - which meant that within both groups there existed considerable variations of wealth and social status. A greater refinement of these categories was presented by many poets but the variables involved were numerous and complicated. As the century progressed there was apparently an increasing emphasis on social divisions reflected in a rich and descriptive vocabulary conveying a dislike of the élite. Throughout the period, however, the most important distinction in poetry remained the traditional one of the æðri and lægri or heldri menn and alþýða.

The framework of the thesis is therefore a comparison between the attitudes of educated and unschooled poets. Clearly such a division is based to some extent on social class, but only partially and imperfectly. A few educated poets came from humble backgrounds, and one of the major unschooled poets of the period, Páll Ólafsson, was a clergyman's son who refused to go to the grammar school. Yet on the whole poets were acutely aware of social and cultural divisions, which they associated not only with nationality but also with literature. The reasons for this

lie primarily in the relationship between Romanticism and nationalism. The latter was of unifying influence among the Icelandic people, whereas the former created a permanent rift among poets. On the surface this was a conflict between different styles of writing: the "new" poetry of the Danish-educated nationalists and the traditional poetry which was increasingly regarded as synonymous with entertainment and spontaneity. By the end of the period most unschooled poets accepted that patriotism and an overt committment to ideals, notably freedom, could be expressed seriously only in the style of the "new" poetry introduced by the Danish-educated þjóðskáld.

The role of poetry in Icelandic society is an important factor in the study of ideas of nationality, partly because it highlights a change in cultural values and ideas. The nineteenth-century Icelander was very much at home with rhymed language; and most unschooled poets were not at ease when expressing their thoughts in prose. The Icelandic language is rich in descriptive words for poets and poetry. These terms reflect very well the hierarchy of poets ranging from stórskáld, ljóðskáld and þjóðskáld - used almost exclusively about educated men in the period 1830 to 1874 - to listaskáld, an apparently more endearing term used about Jónas Hallgrímsson by his friends. On a markedly lower plane were hagyrðingar, who were commonly thought to lack the quintessential inspiration of the muse,

but nevertheless were often regarded by the unschooled population as great masters of verse. A good hagyrðingur might merit the title skáldi, but a bad one could be labelled a leirskáld. With the influence of Romanticism, Icelandic poets tended increasingly to be divided simply into unschooled and educated poets. Although only a few of the latter merited the title þjóðskáld, they were not called hagyrðingar, a term used much more indiscriminately before the eighteen-thirties. In an obituary of the pastor Magnús Grímsson (1825-60), a fellow clergyman - Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson (1835-93) - gave him the neutral title, skáld. Yet Sigurður Breiðfjörð, who was generally recognised as a greater poet than Magnús, was often called hagyrðingur. To some extent this apparently rigid distinction may have been influenced by the style of writing adopted by poets; but gradually this criterion lost its significance. By the mid-century many unschooled poets, Jón Þórðarson (1819-68) for example, preferred lyrical metres and subject-matter to the quatrain, yet would hardly ever merit the appropriate title ljóðskáld. This classification was probably observed most rigidly by educated people. No educated poet would have dared to offend the memory of Bjarni Thorarensen by the title bragarsmiður, which occurs in an obituary written by the farmer-poet, Jón Þórðarson.

After Jónas Hallgrímsson openly criticised the rímur in the thirties, unschooled poets began to defend the

traditional poetry. At the same time they gradually developed a new attitude to literature. Sigurður Breiðfjörð, who bore the brunt of Jónas's attack on the quality of the language, form and subject-matter of the rímur, claimed in 1843 that he wrote such poetry simply to earn a living:

> Ei ég skyldi af eigin vild
> yrki þessi rita,
> tóna skrá eg teygja má
> til að fá mér bita. 15

Romanticism introduced the notion of "art for art's sake" into Icelandic literature, as well as the image of the poet as a person with different insights from those of ordinary mortals. Many of the traditional functions of poetry were increasingly being eroded by novels, newspapers and periodicals - thus diminishing the respect for poetry as a popular craft. The work of the unschooled poet often conveys a fear that the value of his contribution to society and thought was being destroyed by new and alien forces.

Unschooled poets responded in different ways to the growing threat to their status. Some produced a spirited and uncompromising stand against the educated poets and their work which was eroding the traditional poet's status as a creative individual. Many also objected to an association between good poetry and education on the one hand, and lack of schooling and mere rhyming on the other.

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15 Sýnisbók íslenzkra rímna, ed. Sir William A. Craigie (Reykjavík, 1952), III, 364.

In "Náttúran námi ríkari" (published in 1874), Símon Bjarnarson (1844-1916) reflects the characteristic dilemma of the unschooled poet. He defends his position by showing that a poet is divinely inspired and that the muse makes no distinction between high and low, learned and unschooled:

> Ljóðagáfan hrein fram heldur,
> hefur rás svo furða má,
> líkt og gjósi ógnar eldur
> iðrum djúpu jarðar frá;
> vissum ljómar hún í hjörtum,
> hót ei spyr um tígn né seim,
> gædd af drottins blossa björtum
> blikar skært í þessum heim.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.118)

The hopelessness of Símon's defence is reflected in his bitter frustration, and in his claim that the person who improves his mind without the aid of formal schooling is unquestionably equal to his learned fellow. Símon himself struggled against adverse circumstances to try to learn to write, a skill he never mastered. More important were his rather crude attempts to emulate the style and subject-matter of the literary élite - an exercise which reflected both resistance and defeat.

Many poets accepted their fate as mere versemakers and simply made a plea for recognition as skilled craftsmen. Every unschooled poet who contributed to the subject regarded the declining status of traditional poetry with despondency. The argument varied from assertions that the "new" poetry was learned, foreign

and irrelevant to the ordinary Icelander, to a more light-hearted reasoning that "ljettmetið er innanum / opt til heilsubótar" (Lbs. 2039, 8vo.). The relevance of this debate to ideas of nationality lies in the notion, generally accepted in the period, that nationalistic sentiments, even patriotism, were properly expressed only in the "new" poetry. The first "Iceland-poems" - "Ísland" and "Íslands minni" - by Bjarni Thorarensen (1786-1841), were written before 1820 and became a model for subsequent poetry of the genre. Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Ísland" (1835) was not only unfamiliar stylistically, but also appeared in Fjölnir, a periodical that initially encountered resistance among unschooled poets because of its new-fangled foreign style and its criticism of the Icelandic people. The more imaginative unschooled poets, notably Brynjúlfur Oddsson (1824-87), calmly accepted that the educated poets were "háfleygir söng-gyðju svanir" and that their ideas would inaugurate a new era for the Icelanders. He was one of the few unschooled poets to praise Jónas Hallgrímsson in verse and write numerous tributes to the Danish-educated nationalists. He nevertheless defended the traditional poetry with a combination of seriousness and affection:

> Margur samt kvakar á kvisti,
> svo kært er að heyra,
> söngfuglinn sínum með rómi,
> þó svan við ei jafnist;
> oft er sá ómurinn leiddur
> frá ylríku hjarta
> og tilfinning tilgerðarlausri,
> og tálfegurð engri.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.136)

Although Romanticism emphasised the difference between alþýðuskáldskapur and bókmenntir, it nevertheless stimulated a new kind of interest in the traditional popular culture. Elsewhere in Scandinavia Romantic nationalism influenced a myriad of studies and publications of folklore and myths. On the whole, Icelandic nationalists were more concerned with the medieval literature than with oral traditions and folk tales, some of which already existed in manuscripts. When the first collection of Icelandic folklore and tales was published in 1852, the pastor Bjarni Sveinsson (1813-89) strongly criticised those who wanted to preserve what he called "hratið og dritið úr fáfróðum lýð" (Lbs. 1956, 8vo.). A few poets similarly demonstrated that they still held on to the educational values of the Enlightenment, but generally they belonged to the older generation. The Bókmenntafélag increasingly encouraged "folk scholars" and bought miscellaneous manuscripts - Jón Sigurðsson in particular was diligent in hunting for old and new material for the society. By the third quarter of the century the Danish-educated poets were less critical of the traditional metres. In the nineties Benedikt Gröndal (1826-1907) wrote rímur about the popular story of Göngu-Hrólfur and after the seventies, Steingrímur Thorsteinsson wrote a tribute to Sigurður Breiðfjörð in a popular rímur metre:

> Þarna telgdi hann, söngva samdi, sló og reri.
> Auðnulausum ólán greri,
> Að honum baki heimur sneri.
> .....

Hans á tungu ljóðið lék svo létt og glaðan;
Auðug ríkir yndis laðan
í því bezta, sem að kvað hann.[16]

This belated acknowledgement of traditional poetic forms, was in part simply a recognition of a cultural phenomenon. A different attitude to Breiðfjörð's work was expressed by the pastor Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson:

ólærður maður, háður harma fjötrum,
sem hugsjón andans benti fjársjóð á
og söng jafn skært í sínum verstu tötrum
og sumir þeir, er jarðar vegsemd ná.

(Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

Published in Þjóðólfur twenty years after Breiðfjörð's death, the poem conveys elevated notions of the poet as a poor genius whose miserable life reflected the injustice and neglect a true artist tends to suffer from his contemporaries. It was, however, Benedikt Gröndal who most succinctly analysed the influence of the Romantic movement on the Icelanders' attitudes to poetry. He complained to a friend in 1885 that after Jónas Hallgrímsson's onslaught on the rímur in 1837, the traditional poetic metres became gradually associated with inferior literature. The rímur, he argued, "eru ekki einungis ekki skoðaðar með Poesi, heldur rifnar niður og úthúðaðar eins og illgresi, sem ætti að upprætast ... en það eru ekki rímurnar ... heldur rímnaskáldin, sem eru vítaverð" [17] A distinction between alþýðuskáldskapur and

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16 Hannes Pétursson, Steingrímur Thorsteinsson: líf hans og list (Reykjavík, 1964), p.37.

17 Gröndal, Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson, Sendibrjef frá B.G. og til hans (Reykjavík, 1931), p.65.

PART ONE

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1

The Cultural Tradition

Iceland was settled by peoples from Norway and the Norwegian colonies in the Hebrides and Ireland between 870 and 930. It is not certain when the settlers began to call themselves Icelanders. In Heimskringla Snorri Sturluson mentions a poem from the tenth century which suggests that by then a distinction between Norwegians and Icelanders was already established. The first time the word, íslenskur, appears in the literature is in a poem by Sighvatur Þórðarson written ca. 1019.[1] Nineteenth-century nationalists regarded the Alþing as the prime evidence of their forefathers' desire to belong to a separate and independent nation. The Alþing moreover was seen as a reflection of the freedom and justice of the Commonwealth. While it is undeniable that the Alþing demonstrates a certain unity of purpose, it is possible that the Icelanders' concept of nationality was not significantly different from regional patriotism elsewhere in Scandinavia. The laws of the Commonwealth made a clear distinction between Icelanders

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1 Sigurður Líndal, "Ísland og umheimurinn", Saga Íslands, I (Reykjavík, 1974-78), 215.

and foreigners, but the rights of native born peoples apparently differed little from that of other residents.[2] The Alþing may well have originated in more prosaic considerations than those suggested by nineteenth-century nationalists. The idea has been put forward that the purpose of the Alþing was partly to preserve the influence of leading families. Having settled in different districts, they could not fully utilise the traditional support of their followers in the regional assemblies, as was customary in Norway. Evidence in Landnámabók also implies that the leading chieftains in the South of Iceland organised the placing of the Alþing at Þingvellir.[3] In a large and sparsely populated country, the siting of the assembly was important, and Þingvellir was eminently convenient for this powerful group of men.

The Commonwealth has been described as resembling "a union of many states (i.e. chieftaincies) where the administration of law and justice embraced the entire union but in which executive power was altogether lacking".[4]

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2 Ibid., p.221

3 Jakob Benediktsson, "Landnám og upphaf alsherjarríkis", Saga Íslands, I, 170.

4 Jón Jóhannesson, A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth (Manitoba, 1974), p.63.

The Alþing never became a political power in its own right. Its most important function was that of preserving and augmenting the laws which expressed a wide range of social and moral attitudes. The Sagas seem to suggest that the Alþing was also of some cultural importance as a meeting place, and a venue for entertainment and social exchange. Nevertheless, it met only once a year for two weeks to settle judicial and legislative matters; political power rested ultimately in the hands of the chieftains.

The end of the millennium saw the peaceful adoption of Christianity which introduced a dynamic factor into Icelandic society. Initially the Church had to compete for power with the established chieftains, which obliged it to make concessions to the native secular culture. Yet gradually it became a landlord on a scale which eroded the existing social system based on mutual personal dependence between chieftain and farmer. Its power was consolidated partly through education and learning: several monasteries of various orders were established and schools were set up at Skálholt and Hólar, which continued to be the main centres of learning in Iceland until the eighteenth century. During the thirteenth century the connection with the Universal Church became more apparent, as the Church gained in strength in relation to the declining position of the chieftains. Nevertheless, by the end of the Commonwealth the Church had become an established Icelandic institution.

Jónas Hallgrímsson's monumental nationalistic poem, "Ísland", which appeared in the inaugural issue of Fjölnir in 1835, introduced the concept of the Golden Age as an ideal for the future. "Lýsir, sem leiftur um nótt" (Rit, I, 40) was his vivid impression of the impact wrought by the period of the Settlements and Commonwealth on subsequent generations. The Covenant of 1262, which brought the Commonwealth to a close and introduced a monarch into the Icelandic constitution, was regarded by most nationalists as the end of freedom and the beginning of the "six hundred summers" of apathy and decline. They saw the dissolution of the Alþing in 1800 as a symbolic act demonstrating the degradation of the Icelandic culture. The nineteenth-century concept of a nation state differed from the quasi-nationalism, or perhaps more aptly termed patriotism, of the Middle Ages. In Iceland, as in the rest of Europe, a loyalty to the native country was complicated by a universal church and the strength of feudal social relations. It is also probable that by the end of the Commonwealth some Icelanders had come to see their system of government as archaic. The general trend in Europe was towards strong monarchies supported by the Church. In 1247 Þórður kakali and Gissur Þorvaldsson put a dispute for arbitration to the King of Norway, in the presence of a cardinal of the Roman Church. The cardinal observed that he "kallaði það ósannlegt að land það þjónaði eigi undir einhvern konung sem öll önnur í

veröldunni."[5] Whether the comment was intended to convince the Icelanders that their political system should be changed cannot be ascertained, but the move towards unified kingdoms may have had an appeal even in Iceland. On the whole the nineteenth-century nationalists minimised the close connection between Iceland and Norway during the Commonwealth. These links were both cultural and practical since Iceland depended on Norway not only for communication and trade, but also in matters of religion and law.[6]

Although the nineteenth-century nationalists were the first to use the Golden Age as a concept to stir popular patriotic emotions, the early history was always an important feature of the Icelanders' national consciousness. The reasons for this are to be found in the medieval literature. Ari Þorgilsson (1067 or 1068-1148), who was given the title hinn fróði, was the first Icelandic historian known to have written a major work in the native tongue. His Íslendingabók and Landnámabók - which he may written - reflect an interest in the genealogy and lives of the first settlers and their descendants. The fact that these books may not give a reliable account of the period they seek to depict cannot alter their unique character. Contemporary histories elsewhere in Europe were written

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5 Gunnar Karlsson, "Frá þjóðveldi til konungsríkis", Saga Íslands, II, 52.

6 Björn Þorsteinsson and Sigurður Líndal, "Lögfesting konungsvaldsins", Saga Íslands, III, 20-21.

almost exclusively in Latin and thus had a learned audience. By contrast most Icelanders were undoubtedly familiar with the work of these medieval historians. The evidence for this lies partly in the demand for copies - and, equally important, in popular literature down the centuries, reflecting a knowledge of this early literature.

Nineteenth-century interpretations of the Sagas, and of medieval histories and poetry, often stressed the early Icelanders' patriotism and love of country. It is true that the ancient literature demonstrates a profound interest in family and property relationships, which was an essential feature of medieval patriotism. But unlike the Romantics, the Saga-writers convey little appreciation of the Icelandic landscape. The few nature descriptions that appear contrast sharply with the Romantic notions about Iceland. In Biskupa sögur there is a rare fourteenth-century description of Iceland which shows the profound difference in attitudes between medieval and nineteenth-century ideas of nature:

> Greindr guðs þjónn var biskup á því landi er bækr kalla Thile, en Norðmenn nefna Ísland. Má þat ok vel segjast eiginligt nafn þeirrar eyjar, þvíat þar er íss ínóg bæði lands ok lagar. Á sjánum liggja þeir hafísar, at með sínum ofvægiligum vexti taka þeir at fylla norðrhöfin, en yfir háfjöll landsins svá úbræðiligir jöklar með yfirvættis hæð og vídd, at þeim fjalljöklum fellr með atburð stríðr straumur með frábærum flaum og fúlasta snyk, svá at þar af deyja fuglar í lopti en menn á jörðu eðr kvikvendi. Þau eru fjöll önnur þess lands, er ór sér verpa ægilegum eldi með grimmasta grjótkasti, svá at þat brak bresti heyrir um allt landið, 7

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7 Biskupa sögur (Copenhagen, 1878), II, 5.

For a nineteenth-century nationalist such a description of Icelandic rivers and mountains by one of their contemporaries would undoubtedly have been regarded not only as a scurrilous attack but perhaps also as a denial of Icelandic nationality.

The most important period of Saga writing was from the mid-twelfth to the mid-fourteenth century. The subject-matter of the Sagas is the Icelander and his society, real and imaginary, during the tenth and the first half of the eleventh century. The Saga writers tended to idealise this period and showed great tolerance towards the pagan religion of the forefathers - perhaps because in their own turbulent times this era may have appeared stable and yet dynamic. The Sagas contributed a great deal to the Icelanders' lasting interest in the past. This was reinforced by the twelfth-century historical poetry and the thirteenth-century histories, and above all in the rímur. The rímur-poets narrated and adapted material from the Edda, from mythical tales and the Sagas, as well as from contemporary events and popular foreign novels. Until their irreversible decline in the late nineteenth century, the rímur demonstrate particularly well the Icelanders' continuous interest in the medieval literature, which they usually regarded as a true account of the past.

By reinforcing the power of the Danish Crown, the Reformation had a lasting political influence in Iceland. The king became head of the Church and gradually increased

his control over government and administration. The Crown moreover became a large landowner and demonstrated its power by introducing a trade monopoly in 1602 and establishing an absolute monarchy sixty years later. By this time the country had become in effect little more than a colony. The Danish influence was felt primarily in government, in law and in education, which were increasingly modelled on a Danish pattern. Until the eighteenth century, however, only a few Icelanders went abroad; but gradually the Danish language acquired an important place in certain areas of government. Yet the majority of people had limited contact with the Danes. Danish rule in consequence did not impinge significantly on the day-to-day lives of ordinary Icelanders, except indirectly through the trade monopoly, absolutism and the enforcement of Lutheranism. The Reformation had a profound effect on the daily lives of ordinary people but it apparently had only a marginal influence on popular poetry.[8] It introduced a new style of hymn-writing and religious worship and a greater emphasis on reading. Combined with the introduction of printing which propagated translations of foreign stories, this was undoubtedly an influence on popular literature. Subsequently translations of fiction - usually popular stories and adventures - became an important source material for the rímur. Yet the popularity

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8 Óskar Halldórsson, Bókmenntir á Lærdómsöld (Reykjavík, 1978), pp.60-69.

of this material did not significantly diminish familiarity with the traditional poetry and Sagas.

Danish rule introduced a new subject-matter into versemaking - namely complaints against Danish merchants, the trade monopoly and officials of the Crown. This ranged from passive grumbles about high prices and poor quality goods, to vitriolic attacks on Danish individuals. One early example of this poetry is "Árgali" by the pastor Ólafur Einarsson (1573-1651), a man of considerable learning who studied in Copenhagen:

> Hallærið með hungurspínu
> hræðilegana tíðin dýr
> kvelur oss með okri sínu
> einnig varan danska rýr;
> enginn mýkir angurslínu
> Íslandi né forsvar býr. 9

The poem does not attack the Danes as a nation or condemn Danish merchants directly. The emphasis is primarily on the suffering in Iceland - blamed partly on impiety - and on the hopeless circumstances of a country which is ignored and oppressed. It is a characteristic reflection of a prevailing mood in the literature of the period - which, in comparison with eighteenth and nineteenth-century poetry of similar nature, appears pessimistic.

A growing interest in historical matters among Scandinavian scholars in the sixteenth century is

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9 Stefán Einarsson, Austfirzk skáld og rithöfundar (Akureyri, 1964), p.40.

generally attributed to the influence of Renaissance humanism, which in the far North centred on the Nordic medieval past rather than on Greece and Rome. Around the late sixteenth century, historical writing began to revive in Iceland. Some of these works were written in Latin and were clearly intended for foreign rather than Icelandic readership. As early as 1593 Arngrímur Jónsson lærði (1568-1648) wrote a pamphlet, Brevis commentarius de Islandia, (published in Copenhagen) to defend his country against scurrilous descriptions by foreigners.[10] His history of Iceland, Crymogæa (Hamburg, 1606), was one of a handful of similar works published abroad in the seventeenth century. Latin treatises on Iceland reflect the educated Icelanders' desire that foreigners regard their country as a part of the civilised world. It was however, a direct response to the idea that Iceland was an outpost inhabited by a curious semi-barbaric race. This impression appeared in several accounts written by foreign visitors and merchants. Sometimes these were grossly exaggerated, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[11] The historians' response to foreign accounts of the country was relatively unimportant, compared to the revival of research from the seventeenth century onwards. Clergymen

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10 Halldór Hermannsson, Two Cartographers, Islandica XVII (Ithaca, 1926), 5-6.

11 Descriptions of Iceland in foreign publications is discussed in Glöggt er gests augað; safn frásagna frá Íslandi (Reykjavík, 1946).

and self-educated farmers began to write histories, genealogies and annals and a variety of antiquarian studies. Men such as Björn Jónsson á Skarðsá (d.1655), who copied numerous medieval manuscripts and compiled annals, were forerunners of the "folk scholars" of the nineteenth century.

When Matthías Jochumsson (1836-1920) reminded his compatriots in North America, that through its history the Icelandic language had been "sálu fyllt og guðamáli", he echoed typical nationalistic sentiments. The Romantic "hymns" to the mother tongue convey strong emotions and a firm conviction that the language formed a spiritual link between past and present. The fact that the Icelanders wrote extensively in the vernacular from the twelfth century onwards created a cultural continuity. The writing of educated men was relatively accessible to the population at large, even to those who could not read, and in a tiny society provided a common source of ideas. Until the nineteenth century, Iceland had no towns and no permanent village culture. Most people lived on farms and tended to provide their own entertainment, which in the winter months consisted primarily of reading aloud or reciting poetry. Linguistic purism and reverence for the mother tongue was particularly important to the nineteenth-century literary renaissance. Yet in a different way, earlier generations were also concerned with the development of the language. As early as the twelfth century a grammarian devised a

modified Latin and English alphabet for Icelandic and wrote a treatise on its spelling and pronounciation.[12] The Skaldic poetry, and subsequently the rímur, demonstrate that Icelandic was a literary language in the Middle Ages. Poets consciously developed a highly artificial kind of diction, strict and stylised rhyme and rhythm and poetic language based on kenningar and heiti. The well-known religious poem Lilja, by the fourteenth-century monk Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, provides an oft-quoted example of the Icelandic poet's love of his language. Before he goes on to praise the Holy Virgin, the monk pays a handsome tribute to the mother tongue: "þvílík tunga".

The Reformation created a new interest in the vernacular languages in Europe, particularly because of the Protestant emphasis on reading the Bible. This led to the translation into Danish of the Latin catechism for use in Iceland, the Faroes and Norway. The discrimination against minority languages in the territories of the Danish Crown had little effect in Iceland, whereas in Norway and the Faroes Danish became the written language. The New Testament had already been translated into Icelandic in 1540, a decade before the Reformation, thus establishing a tradition of religious writing in the native tongue.

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12 Jón Helgason, Från Oddur Gottskalksson till Fjölnir (Uppsala, 1931), p.41.

The post-Reformation period saw an attempt to purify the Icelandic language, beginning with the ideas of Arngrímur Jónsson lærði, who stressed the danger of using Danish and German words in Icelandic speech. For two centuries these ideas were more a theory than a practical observance. But during the eighteenth century, when Danish increasingly dominated law and administration, the movement to improve the language was revived. Although this may have been directly influenced by Danish ideas, its success depended on attitudes that had existed already in the twelfth century - when Icelandic words were developed for foreign concepts. The rímur played a major role in propagating active general interest in the native tongue. They were composed, read and listened to by all classes of people, who had to possess considerable proficiency in the language to be able to understand the narrative in this type of poetry. Extensive knowledge and appreciation of literary devices must have been widespread, to judge from the vast number of rímur and other kinds of poetry that were composed and copied through the centuries.

In 1571 Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541-1627) began what he thought was a long overdue spiritual reformation among his compatriots. His hymnbook of 1589 was the first attempt to create a tradition of Icelandic Lutheran hymns within the native poetic forms. At the same time he denounced secular popular versemaking for its irreverent, even indecent, subject-matter. The failure of his attack

on secular poetry led him to encourage poets to write rímur using the Bible as a source. In spite of Guðbrandur's concern with the profane nature of the Icelander's entertainment, the rímur continued unabated; and even clergymen persisted in writing secular poetry. For different reasons the reformers of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century nationalists criticised the rímur. The latter in particular sometimes claimed that the rímur-poets wrote in a style which was a product of a declining culture. They failed to appreciate the importance of this poetry in stimulating an interest in the past - and the ancient literature in particular. This fact, combined with the Icelanders' familiarity with poetry, provided the Romantics with a receptive audience who fairly quickly became accustomed to a new style of writing.

Throughout the Settlements and Commonwealth it was customary for Icelandic men to serve as liegemen and court poets to Scandinavian kings and aristocrats. In this way - as the literature so often elaborates - they made their fame and fortune. It is clear from genealogies and the Sagas that the Icelanders had a passionate interest in aristocratic lineage and tried to trace their ancestry to royal blood. The writers of the Sagas tried to show that their characters were men of superior quality and created situations where their wisdom, courage and skills are seen to equal that of noblemen. The Sagas depict their heroes as men of great and varied attributes, rather than simply

as strong fighters. Thus they can be seen to acquire a position in the king's favour often superior to that of men of greater social standing. The dróttkvæði, or Skaldic poems, were usually written for kings and noblemen who received such tributes at court. Icelandic medieval literature also has a genre of Sagas devoted to kings which includes Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla. This tradition was continued in the rímur, which, after the downfall of the Norwegian monarchs, adapted stories about kings and noblemen from exotic lands such as Persia, Greece and Italy. The tradition of writing about the reigning Danish monarchs began only in the mid-eighteenth century.

The nationalistic poetry of the nineteenth century was to some extent written within the native literary tradition, especially in its concern with the medieval past and the language. Yet its novelty is indisputable in relation to previous patriotic poetry. There were indeed few such poems written before the eighteenth century. A rare exception is "Vísnaflokkur um Íslands gæði", written by the pastor Einar Sigurðsson (1538-1626). Like "Árgali" - written by Einar's son - the poem conveys a concern with conditions in Iceland, but in contrast its central aim is to show the country's positive side:

því optlega hefur mig angrið hitt
að Ísland margir hæða,
en móðurjörð er mér svo kær
mig hefur langað, guð minn skær,
að geta þess allra gæða. 13

This sentiment closely resembles that of Arngrímur Jónsson's Latin treatises written in the same period. There is also a slight resemblance to the nationalists' emotional feeling for the motherland. The term móðurjörð - at least to those who know nineteenth-century poetry - appears to convey an unambiguous love of country. Yet this is perhaps misleading. The poem is not in any sense an "Iceland-poem": it does not give Iceland human attributes or reflect any concern with landscape. Unlike the ættjarðarljóð, it completely lacks the confidence and purpose which was an integral feature of Romantic nationalism.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Romantics' interpretation of Icelandic history is their disregard of continuity in the cultural traditions. Moreover, the sharp division they drew between the Golden Age and the "six hundred summers" of gradual decline, undermined the affinity between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. The success of Romantic nationalism depended partly on the secularisation of ideas about society and culture which began during the previous century. This was an important change and a break with attitudes dominant since the Reformation. The gradual secularisation of Icelandic culture removed the dislike of the religious practises

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13 Austfirzk skáld, p.38.

of the early Icelanders, which influenced the historical interpretation of several poets into the nineteenth century. A diminishing reliance on religion as an explanation of natural phenomena was an important background to the nationalists' emphasis on the Golden Age as a model for a new future. Because of the strong cultural continuity in Iceland, the Romantic poets and nationalists could appeal to their compatriots' knowledge of the medieval literature.

CHAPTER 2

Eggert Ólafsson - The Enlightenment Legacy

During the eighteenth century the Icelanders experienced not only a series of severe winters and cold summers but also a number of natural disasters and misfortunes. The century began with an outbreak of smallpox which claimed around 36% of the population. In 1761 an attempt to increase the yield of wool from the Icelandic sheep by cross-fertilisation with English rams brought a devastating disease to the livestock. In the eighties a further quarter of the inhabitants perished in a smallpox epidemic and the aftermath of the Laki eruption - the móðuharðindi.[1] It is estimated that between 1783 and 1785 farmers lost over forty thousand cattle and horses and nearly two hundred thousand sheep. Although the population quickly began to recover, Denmark's involvement in the Napoleonic Wars brought added economic problems. Icelandic society, however, changed very little during the century, and in many respects retained its medieval

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1 In 1786 the number of Icelanders fell almost two thousand short of the 50,358 counted in the first census of 1703, see Frá siðaskiptum til sjálfstæðisbaráttu, p.34 and Saga Íslendinga, VII, 280.

economic structure until towns and villages began to develop in the nineteenth century. Farming remained the only independent economic activity, dominating trade and fishing - despite the importance of the latter to the Icelanders' survival. The social structure was basically made up of the Crown's officials - sýslumenn, the clergy and the few teachers of the grammar schools - independent farmers, tenants and farmhands. The income and status of farmers, the clergy and tenants depended primarily on the value of their holdings - crofters were often worse off than farmhands and were equally prone to end their lives on the parish.

Because the great majority of Icelanders lived on isolated farms, social divisions were not clearly reflected in dress, habits and occupation. Until the nineteenth century, Iceland had no separate class of tradesmen and the great majority of workers were partly or wholly engaged in farming. Neither was there an aristocracy or a distinct upper-class with integrated and separate social and cultural modes of behaviour. Formal education, however, increasingly became an important factor creating social and cultural divisions. Private correspondence, for example, suggests that by the nineteenth century a close fraternity existed between former students of the grammar school. Even so, family connections remained the pivot of Icelandic society. Influential men were invariably descended from the better

families, as exemplified by the Stephensens who retained their social and economic ascendancy into the twentieth century. Those without property had very limited prospects and few opportunities for betterment. Yet on the surface social differences were probably not very striking, because of the poor and cramped housing and the lack of commodities. Domestic servants and farmhands usually lived in conditions identical to those of their employers, unless these happened to be among the few wealthy and educated families. All Icelanders had to endure the same problems of climatic conditions and the deficient communications with each other and the outside world. The better-off, however, were particularly restricted by the country's economic and political dependence. Foreign control of trade and shortage of capital meant that they could not branch out on their own, or improve the economy without aid or permission from the Danish government.

It is no exaggeration to describe the eighteenth century as a period of overall economic stagnation in Iceland, even decline. It was nevertheless a time which produced a wealth of ideas, primarily in an effort to improve the conditions in the country. The impetus for reform came almost exclusively via the Danish Enlightenment. The archetypal Danish reformer of the period would be a physiocrat and a humanitarian, especially in penal matters. He possessed moreover a great faith in the possibility of changing the human

character by good example, education and decent environment. These ideas led to a quiet revolution in Denmark, reflected above all in education and in the legislation that ended feudal restrictions. The Danish absolute monarchy, especially after 1784, solved many of the problems of the peasant which created such insuperable obstacles for the enlightened despots on the Continent.

In literature, education and the arts generally, the Danish Enlightenment placed great reliance on the printed word. When Frederik V succeeded his pietist father to the throne in 1747, a great wave of magazines, pamphlets and books - often translated from English - hit the Danish public. A characteristic feature of this material was its stress on the utility of all knowledge, from sanitation to philosophy. The movement was not a radical challenge aiming to destroy the existing system but rather an attempt to improve the status of the burgher and prosperous farmer. This mood is clearly reflected in reform proposals, and in the new architecture and planning of Copenhagen after the great fire in 1728. The Enlightenment is also reflected in the plays of Ludvig Holberg who attacked pietism, superstition and the enclosed world of the University scholar. At the same time he did not advocate a meritocracy, and was often condescending towards the aspirations of the lower orders, especially the peasant. In plays such as Jeppe paa Bjerget and Den politiske Kandestöber he ridiculed the political ambitions of simple farmers and artisans. The

burgher and his family did not escape Holberg's humorous criticism; yet what he saw as his vulgarity and political naivety was a weakness which could be rectified. By contrast the traditional literary figures - the heroic knights and kings, the shepherds and the milkmaids - are mercilessly parodied in his work.

After the seventeen-forties the Danish Enlightenment began to make some impact on educated Icelanders. The government financed various inquiries into the country's social and economic conditions and encouraged studies of a scientific nature, especially in the natural sciences. The establishment of the Landsnefnd in 1770-71 set in motion a number of studies and expeditions to inquire into Iceland's problems. This included the work of Ólafur Ólafvíus (1741-88), who in 1775-77 collected information about Iceland's past and present. This enthusiastic activity produced important legislation - primarily the repeal of the trade monopoly in 1787 - and stimulated various attempts to improve the Icelandic economy. A particularly significant result of Danish concern with farming was the government's decision to sell church land in Iceland. Although there were long term benefits, the immediate impact was hampered by unforseen disasters and by a lack of finance. Practical undertakings such as the manufacturing project of Skúli Magnússon (1711-94) - the Innréttingar established in the early fifties - suffered from the near impossibility of producing adequate profit from ventures of this kind.

Moreover, many of the agricultural innovations were based on superficial knowledge of conditions in Iceland. Those actively engaged in reforms were largely Danes or Danish-educated Icelanders, who saw all too clearly how backward and poor their countrymen were in comparison with Denmark, particularly Copenhagen. Many of these people, however, were not very sensitive to the problems involved and, as suggested in contemporary writing, their efforts were sometimes resented by the farmers.

Although by the end of the Napoleonic Wars the Icelanders were in many ways little better off than a century earlier, the influence of the Enlightenment wrought a number of changes which contributed to the success of the national "awakening" in 1830-74. The most important eighteenth-century legacy was undoubtedly in the sphere of education. After the Reformation a royal ordinance required all clergy within the Danish Kingdom to ensure that every man, woman and child received religious instruction. There is evidence to suggest that this was not rigidly enforced in Iceland, since church leaders in the early eighteenth century, including Jón Vídalín (1666-1720), were very concerned about the state of general education and religious instruction. Although the problem was raised with the government, nothing was done until Christian VI sent Bishop Ludvig Harboe to Iceland in 1741.[2]

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2 Saga Íslendinga, VII, 187.

In four years Harboe visited every parish, testing youths in Scripture and talking to ministers. His findings were that many pastors were ill-equipped to carry out Christian instruction and that less than half the population could read. Harboe's visit resulted in a tightening of legislation, making the pastor responsible for the total education of his flock; confirmation of an illiterate person, for example, became a punishable offence. Although the grammar schools faced severe difficulties during the period - there was only one school left in the country when Hólaskóli was closed down in 1801 - it appears that education of the clergy and the population at large improved during the century. It is thought that between 1740 and 1790 the Icelanders achieved a near universal literacy, if one excludes the elderly, especially women.[3]

Another important change was that which took place in publishing - notably with the establishment of a second printing press in 1772, which broke three centuries of Church monopoly. In spite of continuous financial difficulty, the new press managed to bring out the first periodical in Iceland as well as pamphlets and the first popular rímur. Earlier printed rímur had been exclusively biblical. The press became a vehicle for reform and change,

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3 Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson, "Íslenzk alþýðumenntun á 18. öld," Tíminn, 20th June, 1925.

printing material for various new societies whose names perfectly demonstrate their aim - e.g. Landsuppfræðifélagið and Lærdómslistafélagið. Ólafur Ólavíus, founder of the printing press at Hrappsey, expressed the sentiments behind the venture in terms which echo the attitudes of those who represented the Enlightenment in Iceland:

> Hví blómstra ekki vorar fabríkur, akuryrkja, höndlun með framandi og æfing í sjókonstinni? Já það er minstu varða þykir, hví eru nytjalönd vor so hrapalega til reika, eins og vjer og forfeður vorir hefðum sofið alla æfi eður ættum vjer ei nje vorir eftirkomendur að lifa lengur en til morguns? í einu orði: því erum vjer so agndofa orðnir að vjer látum sjálfa náttúruna, það er að segja vinda og vötn, troða oss undir fótum, þar þá víða hvar mætti loku fyrir skjóta? Uppá þetta munu mjer, þegar svör búin að slíkt geti prentverkið ómögulega endurbætt. Jeg játa það er satt að því leyti, sem peninga útlag snertir, en það getur þó, með lærðra manna tilstyrk, útgefið þær bækur, er sýna oss vorn ófullkomleika, og leiða undir eins til þekkingar á þeim hlutum, sem nú eru huldir fyrir margra augum. ... að hefði pressan fyrr innkomið hjer í landið, þá er líklegt að fleira mundi af fornaldar gullvægum skrifum vorum óbrjálað í minni vera, 4

Except for the style of the language and the belief in subjecting nature completely to man's material needs, this comment accords well with the sentiments of the nineteenth-century <u>þjóðskáld</u>.

When Magnús Stephensen (b.1762) died in 1833, Bjarni Thorarensen wrote to his friend Grímur Jónsson: "Sit

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4 Jón Helgason, <u>Hrappseyjarprentsmiðjan</u>, Safn fræðafélagsins, VI (Copenhagen, 1925), 14-15.

Fædreneland har han vist nok skadet meget ... men ... det tror jeg at mere var Tidsalderens Skyld, hvilken han i sin Ungdoms- og Manddomsalder aldrig mægtede a komme forbi, og i sin Alderdom ikke engang formaaede at fölge."[5] Although Bjarni's personal animosity towards Magnús may have coloured his view somewhat, his low opinion of eighteenth-century ideas was consistent, and was generally echoed by educated nationalists in 1830-74. In his position as a judge in the High Court, Magnús strongly advocated the humanitarian penal system encouraged by the Danish Enlightenment. Although Magnús was not a remarkable poet, his "Aumingjans tár" movingly conveys his abhorrence of brutally punishing the poor and helpless for petty crimes:

> Tár sem þegjandi fram hér fljóta,
> Finn ég verðugri heiðurs njóta,
> Enn hins aðkeyptu hefð og stand;
> Miskunarlaust þá líf hér liggur,
> En líkn við dóm ei finnur hriggur,
> Hvað stoðar gull, ætt, hefð ei grand.[6]

Different attitudes to punishment and the law caused a major conflict between Magnús and Bjarni, who was a judge in the High Court between 1811 and 1833. Bjarni's poem "Miskun aldarinnar" demonstrates his essentially retributive view of the law, and was probably directed

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5 Bjarni Thorarensen, Bréf, ed. Jón Helgason, Safn fræðafélagsins, XIII (Copenhagen, 1943), 104.

6 Magnús Stephensen, Ljóðmæli (Viðey, 1842), p.47.

partly at Magnús's leniency in judgement of petty crimes:

> Öldin er sú bezta
> á sem lifum nú,
> drottnar miskun mesta,
> mæt er dyggðin sú,
> það er hið sanna gæzkugeð,
> drepa nenna engir úlf
> allt þó myrði féð.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 97)

Bjarni was also severely critical of Magnús's part in the dissolution of the Alþing, which to most nationalists reflected an eighteenth-century disregard of the medieval heritage. For the same reason Magnús's monopoly of publishing in Iceland - from the seventeen-nineties - incurred the wrath of nationalists long after his death. Magnús's work in this field was always controversial, especially after 1801 when he published a new hymnbook, very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment. The book placed a new emphasis on praising the Lord instead of the traditional reminder that man was a creature of sin. Many people, including the clergyman Jón Jónsson lærði (1759-1846), felt it offered a watered-down religion - others complained about its lack of artistry. Among those who took part in the controversy was the poet and clergyman Jón Þorlákssón (1744-1819), who resented Magnús's tinkering with his contributions to the book. The poems that he wrote on this occasion were mostly personal attacks on the poet-editor's lack of poetic ability:

Skáldskapur þinn er skothent klúður,
skakksettum höfuðstöfum með,
víðast hvar stendur vættar-hnúður,
valinn í fleyg, sem rífur tréð.
Eitt rekur sig á annars horn,
einsog graðpening hendir vorn.[7]

Magnús composed and translated a number of hymns and poems which many of his contemporaries regarded as a travesty of traditional Icelandic rhyme and style, and without imagination.

The Romantics' criticism of eighteenth-century literature was its disregard of beauty and misuse of the mother tongue. Magnús had nevertheless several things in common with the Romantic poets. A sincerely patriotic man, he devoted much energy and finance to publish unprofitable books which he thought would educate his countrymen. In a climate of severe economic depression, when few people could afford the luxury of buying books, he persevered to write and publish the first Icelandic monthly paper, Klausturspósturinn, which printed domestic news, including proceedings in the High Court, and a variety of articles on practical matters. Like his successors, Magnús saw himself as a cultural leader and placed his faith above all in the power of the printing press to achieve a cultural revolution. In common with Bjarni Thorarensen, he had an essentially paternalistic approach to progress which accorded well with their elevated family backgrounds and high social positions.

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7 Jón Þorláksson, Íslenzk Ljóðabók (Copenhagen, 1842-43) II, 576.

Magnús was concerned above all with disseminating knowledge to counteract superstitions and conservatism. It is significant that like Jónas Hallgrímsson he disliked the popularity of the rímur, but his criticism was of their content rather than their style. The nationalists had a very similar attitude, but they differed as to what should constitute national education. Discussing the gradual improvement that he felt had taken place in Icelandic writing since the thirties, Gísli Brynjúlfsson (1827-88) argued in 1848 that truly national literature and a pure but living language could not take root in Iceland until the eighteenth-century generation was dead and gone: "Áður enn bókmenntir okkar að öllu verði þjóðlegar og tunga okkar komist aptur í blóma, verður hin spillta kynslóð gjörsamlega að líða undir lok eins og Gyðingar í eyðimörkinni: þeir sem hafa setið við kjötkatlana egypzku geta ei fengið að sjá hið fyrirheitna landið".[8] Harsh words, which reflect very well the nationalist's notion about the Icelandic Enlightenment.

Only three eighteenth-century Icelanders, all poets, were widely praised by poets in the period 1830-1874. The poetry of Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal (1762-1825) and Jón Þorláksson, especially the latter, was seen as a modest step towards the rebirth of the Icelandic language which paved the way for the "new" poetry. Both poets were

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8 Norðurfari, II, 1849 , 14.

popular in their lifetime, especially Jón whose Tullins kvæði (1774)- mainly translations - was the first collection of secular poetry apart from the rímur to be published in Iceland. Both poets were later acclaimed for reviving the ancient metre fornyrðislag - which Jón used in his translation of Milton's Paradise Lost and Klopstock's Messias, and Benedikt chose for his translation of Pope's Temple of Fame.

(1726-68)
Eggert Ólafsson was presented as a hero in a great number of poems written by educated and unschooled poets in the nineteenth century. He inspired Jónas Hallgrímsson to write Hulduljóð in which Eggert is depicted communicating with nature in a manner quite unthinkable in his own time. After graduating from Skálholtskóli in 1746, Eggert left for Copenhagen where he studied a variety of subjects, notably natural science as well as philology, law, languages and a range of practical topics including agriculture. He travelled in Iceland with Bjarni Pálsson (1718-79) during the fifties, collecting material for a book describing Icelandic nature and society.

In 1767 Eggert was appointed a vice-lawman in the South and East quarters of Iceland; but the next year he was drowned with his wife in the bay of Breiðifjörður. The event no doubt gave Eggert a tragic aura which captured the imagination of numerous later poets, notably Matthías Jochumsson who described his death with great emotion as

an irreparable loss to the motherland.

It is a little paradoxical that Eggert should have been a popular figure in an era of nationalism when democracy began to influence political thinking. His political views and social attitudes were almost diametrically opposed to those of the Fjölnir group and subsequent nationalists. His style of writing moreover exemplified in many ways what the proponents of the "new" poetry tried to eradicate from Icelandic literature. Yet Eggert established a tradition which was followed by subsequent educated Icelanders. He saw himself as a cultural and social leader, and his work - including the poetry - was primarily written to improve his country. Like educated Icelanders before and after the eighteenth century, Eggert was grieved to feel that his countrymen "séu að aðhlátri og forakti orðnir hjá útlendum mönnum."[9] This came about, he argued, primarily because Iceland was poor; and, unlike the rest of Scandinavia, it had not benefitted from the Enlightenment. He thought that his countrymen lacked moral values, were improvident, superstitious and reluctant to adopt the ideas that had changed other Europeans. This aspect of Eggert's poetry was undoubtedly within the traditional laments in the heimsósómi and aldarháttur.[10] These poems, especially the

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9 Quoted in Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, Íslenzk endurreisn (Reykjavík, 1926), II, 382.

10. The earliest known heimsósómi is by Skálda-Sveinn (c.1500). The aldarháttur, aldarsöngvar, heimsádeilur etc. belong to the same genre and were particularly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

former, are depressing comments about the state of the world, and usually concentrate on admonishing the immorality and impiety which the poet sees engulfing contemporary society. Eggert's work only rarely conveys the hopeless and pious remonstrations of his predecessors. Like the political nationalists he was concerned above all with finding remedies to bring Iceland on the road to recovery.

Eggert was the first Icelandic poet to glorify the absolute monarchy and the social order which it represented. He maintained not only that an absolute monarchy was necessary for the maintenance of peace and prosperity, but also that it reflected the natural order of things. In Denmark, where he stayed for more than ten years, he apparently became strongly attached to the Danish Royal House. His praise of Frederik V reflects a firm belief in the semi-divine nature of kingship. The king is the father, the provider who "gives" everything to his people from his grace:

> Friðrik, fimti kóngr Dana,
> frægstr er það hnoss;
> bezt skikk, bezta dygð og vana
> bezt veitir oss,
> mat, drykk, mildi nægta foss
> býðr, í einu orði:
> ástar föður-koss.
>
> (Kvæði, p.69)

Eggert's attempt to fit this notion of kingship to Iceland's unusual social and geographical circumstances does not conceal the fact that the blueprint for his ideas

was Denmark, a society that differed fundamentally from his own. Most Icelandic poets in the next century followed Eggert's example and described their king incongruously as "our father", but always as the "king of Denmark" or the Danes". Eggert's poetry conveys an absolute faith in the king's goodwill towards his Icelandic subjects. This faith and a belief in an absolute monarchy undoubtedly contradicted his own and his contemporaries' dislike, even hatred, of the royal trade monopoly. Moreover, Eggert's superlative praise of the king's benevolence is paradoxical in view of his complaints about the country's poverty and isolation from the progress taking place in Denmark. This paradox is particularly clear in "Einvaldsvísur", an extravagant tribute to the absolute monarchy:

> Eingan slíkan Íslendingar
> áttu gram að kærleiks frama:
> hildíngr vorrar örbyrgð aldar
> auði vill og gæzku fylla,
>
> (Kvæði, p.74)

One of the main problems in Iceland, Eggert argued on several occasions, was a lack of respect for natural social hierarchy. This is a subject referred to in a number of his poems, notably "Ísland". In the lengthy annotation Eggert sums up his attitude to government: "Ill valdstjórn er slæm, eingin valdstjórn er miklu verri, en lángverst er sú valdstjórn, sem hefir einga krapta yfir þá undirgefnu, og er uppá þá komin" (Kvæði, p.26). The general poverty that had prevailed in Iceland for so long he argued,

"gjörðu ei einn öðrum fremri, heldr alla að mestu jafnauma; það er það versta tilstand eins lands, og hnekkir mesti einnar þjóðar í góðri stjórnsemi, að allir séu að efnum jafnir, því þá þrýtr undireins herradæmið, óttinn og undirgefnin, og þykist hvörr sér ærinn" (Kvæði, p.15). Although Eggert was always concerned with improvement through education he believed in the harsh control of the lower orders, whom he usually referred to as "hinir undirgefnu". At times he clearly doubted the efficacy of justice and progress without "harðæri nær sem mýkindi duga ekki, so sem Pjetur Czar gerði í Risslandi og færði hann þó inn lærdóm allskonar."[11]

Eggert presents his most coherent views on the ideal social organisation in Búnaðarbálkur - his major work, which was well known in the nineteenth century. It was published in 1783 but reappeared in Ármann á alþingi, the first patriotic periodical. The poem is exclusively written from the point of view of the better-off farmer, whom Eggert clearly regarded as the pivot of a progressive society. It is in three parts: Eymdaróður which admonishes incompetent and self-indulgent farmers, whereas the second, Náttúrulyst, depicts a young man observing the wonders of nature from the point of view of the potential farmer. The third and longest part, Munaðar-dæla, describes the perfect farmer and his life in minute detail

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11 Quoted in Íslenzk endurreisn, II, 383.

which includes the wife's daily chores. Unlike the Romantic poet, who searched for spiritual fulfilment in nature, Eggert sees the natural world as an example of how man should order his society.

Eggert cast the farmer in a mould strikingly similar to that of the Danish burgher or independent farmer. This is conveyed very clearly in "Píknaspillir", a poem about the degrading conditions daughters of Iceland's "middle class" farmers had to suffer. Because their parents disregarded moral and class values, these young girls are compromised by any male. The farmer, Eggert suggests, should prevent all his children - male and female - from mixing freely with servants and farmhands:

> vinnufólks er sollr súr,
> sést þar klám með blótum.
>
> (Kvæði, p.52)

In his extensive annotations, Eggert goes on to explain that the lower orders not only use indecent language while they work, but also that their rustic jollity often leads to "saurlifnað og barnagetnað". Women of the lower order were clearly not expected to hold elevated notions of propriety, and in this poem Eggert does not waste his energy and enthusiasm to bring about general moral reform:

> Fallið get eg aldrei í
> undrun, þótt eg heyri,
> giljist stelpa, griðka, þý,
> grátr lángtum meiri
> er að heira um borg og bý
> bestu kosti fiplaðar.
>
> (Kvæði, p.51)

The Danish origins of Eggert's social attitudes are clearly reflected in the notion that different moral and social values for farmers and their employees were quite appropriate. Moreover, a separation between these two groups of people was totally impracticable on the Icelandic farm in an economy where a learned clergyman, such as Jón Þorláksson, could not escape physical labour. More often, however, Eggert simply admonished the Icelandic inhabitants as a whole, sometimes in language which is strikingly reminiscent of seventeenth-century Church leaders. In the foreword to "Helblinda" he blames the decline in population on his countrymen's "aumkunarligri ótímgun, og undarligu sinnuleysi ... yfirgángandi ævívirðilegu lostagirnd hórdóms og saurlifnaðar" (Kvæði, p.53). Eggert's conception of social unity was essentially different from the nationalists' appeal to one people. He clearly felt aggrieved not only because his countrymen were poor but that they were all "jafn aumir".

What particularly endeared Eggert to the nationalists was his single-minded devotion to historical precedent. In this he differed fundamentally from many of his Danish-educated contemporaries, notably Hannes Finsson (1739-96). Yet an interest in the Middle Ages was a fashion in historical scholarship at the time. The post-Renaissance concern with original sources among Scandinavian scholars directed their attention to the Icelandic manuscripts.

The manuscripts had been scattered around the country in private ownership and had undergone successive copying down the centuries. Thus when Árni Magnússon (1663-1730) removed the bulk of the manuscripts to Copenhagen, the Icelanders were not completely bereft of their literary heritage. But the loss was undoubtedly detrimental to scholarship, and was resented by historians at home who often had to write to Copenhagen for information about their own past. On the other hand, the presence in Copenhagen of a large collection of manuscripts offered scholarly opportunities to Icelanders undergoing their higher education. They were increasingly valued as interpreters of the manuscripts; and in 1730, when the collection went to the University, a legacy provided funds for Icelandic students to work on them.

When Eggert Ólafsson's "Ísland" first appeared in print in 1832, it influenced several unschooled poets to write narrative poems with historical themes. The poem is extremely long, and laboriously annotated, dealing with Icelandic history chronologically from the Settlement to the present - a section covering each century. It is a determined effort to teach the people new ways and improve their morality. The longest section is devoted to the present, with a backward look for guidance on how to establish a better society. Eggert's interpretation of the Golden Age resembled that of the nationalists, only insofar as he praised the Settlement and Commonwealth

period. Like most of his contemporaries, Eggert was severely critical of paganism and the Catholic faith. The religion of the ancients was a factor which militated against his admiration of the Middle Ages, to the extent that he never idealised the period or its people:

> Þessi bragna blóminn
> bar þó lýti á sér:
> kunnu kristindóminn
> karlar eingir hér.

(Kvæði, p.11)

Eggert focuses on the advent of Christianity, and makes rather more of the early scholars and bishops than Saga characters such as Gunnar Hámundarson and Egill Skallagrímsson. Nevertheless, his admiration of early Christianity is guarded. His explanation of the decline and fall of the Commonwealth hinges on a vague association between popery and lawlessness and on the atrocities of the chieftains and the decadence of the clergy which he believed had begun during the thirteenth century.

Eggert clearly had only a limited interest in the ancient Icelanders' heroism in battle but like Jónas Hallgrímsson he valued their fame abroad. He did not see them as vikings fighting battles for gain but civilised men valued by noblemen and yet feared by violent ribalds:

> Hróss við gnóttir geingu
> garpar hildar-dans;
> meiri frægð þó feingu
> flestir utanlands
> kóngum, jörlum, hersum hjá;
> voðamenn og víkíngar
> vildu ei fást við þá.

(Kvæði, p.11)

It is their ancestry and laws that Eggert regards as the most admirable characteristics of the forefathers. The majority of the settlers were "göfugmenni: lendir menn, hersar og jarlar eðr þeirra synir og niðjar, já kóngar og kóngbornir" (Kvæði, p.10). He saw the end of the Commonwealth as a time when order prevailed over chaos, caused by indiscriminate passion and individualism among the chiefs and the Catholic clergy:

> Þeir urðu ofr svæsnir,
> en manndygðin þraut;
> sumra svik og hræsni
> sæmdir rak á braut;
> páfavillan vaxa nam;
> hreinsun, bannið, husl, ágirnd,
> helgi, klukknaglam:
>
> (Kvæði, pp.12-13)

The Norwegian kings saved the country with laws and government, and prevented a further degeneration of civilised existence in Iceland:

> harðnað hefði glíma,
> hefði ei kóngrinn
> tamið þeirra losta lund
> hvörr mundi annan hafa strax
> heljar sendt á fund.
>
> (Kvæði, p.15)

His unquestioning faith in the Danish monarchs is demonstrated in his description of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which he regarded as in every way more prosperous and admirable than the last phase of the Commonwealth. Natural disasters, plague and Catholicism are the main problems, the last named in particular. Yet this was for Eggert a period of peace and prosperity, when the Icelanders had extensive communications with other

countries:

> Norskir, Írskir, Enskir
> áttu ferð til mín;
> Þýskir máttu mennskir
> mökin hafa fín.
> við mín börn í værð og ró:
> hvorutveggjum hagnaðar
> heillin þokka bjó.
>
> (Kvæði, p.17)

Not surprisingly, Eggert regarded the Reformation as a watershed in Icelandic history. Yet paradoxically there followed an economic and moral decline, presented by Eggert in an image of Iceland as an ageing woman gradually unable to bear healthy children. He provides no convincing explanation for this contradiction but incongruously maintains his trust in the effectiveness and benevolence of absolute monarchy. The blame for the appalling conditions that he felt existed in his own age, is placed on the people. They not only disregard the advice and example of their "betters" but also mismanage the land, and generally live in apathy and sloth. This view was modified by Eggert's extensive travels in Iceland, when he obtained first-hand knowledge of the customs and culture of his countrymen. In his Ferðabók only certain districts, notably the South-West where fishermen congregated, are seen as beyond reclaim.

In Helblinda the condemnation of the people is ferociously emotional and uncompromising, whereas Hafnarsæla shows the conditions in Iceland with stark

realism. Although clearly written tongue-in-cheek, it expresses Eggert's admiration for civilised Copenhagen and his despair for his countrymen. The poem begins by describing the man-made delights of Copenhagen, its gardens, its streets and its sophisticated inhabitants whom he treats with irony yet a grudging admiration. But on returning home to Iceland:

> Eftir skil eg öldu-stokkinn,
> annað kemur hljóð í strokkinn
> Ísa múga finn eg flokkinn,
> fína málið burt er þá,
> hissa skríll á rauða rokkinn
> rekur augun bæði.
>
> (Kvæði, pp.123-4)

The Icelander's lack of sophistication is matched by the women's sullen unfriendly manners: "Fljóðin typpt mig þurlig þéra", and the dilapidated surroundings:

> Kerin blökk og fötin farin,
> fornfálig og sundr-barin,
> moldar-veggir; skatna skarinn
> skraut og glaumur leggst í dá.
>
> (Kvæði, p.124)

Eggert's pessimistic view of the present was tempered by optimism for the future which reflects the influence of the Enlightenment on his work. This is particularly true of "Mánamál" which depicts the first settler, his son, grandson and neighbour leaving their burial mounds in the mid-eighteenth century. Looking over Reykjavík, where Skúli Magnússon had recently set up the Innréttingar, the ghosts discuss Icelandic history, each man representing a different viewpoint. Þorkell máni, who asked to be

carried out into the sun when he felt death approaching, reflects Eggert's own enlightened view:

> Koma munu læknar
> þeirs landsmanna
> bæta geðbresti,
> landstjórn bæta,
> byggja kunnustur
> og vegligt bóka vit.

(Kvæði, p.82)

The stanza expresses complete faith in improvement: educated leaders will eventually come and will change not only government and learning, but will also alter man's character. Here Eggert departs entirely from previous poets who were convinced of man's original sin.

Eggert was the first Icelandic poet consistently to express patriotism in his work. His legacy to nationalistic poetry is demonstrated by his "Ísland ögrum skorið", the only poem written before the nineteenth century to acquire a secure place in the Icelanders' patriotic repertoire. Although it conveys a deep love of country, the poem reflects an attitude to nature which differs fundamentally from that of later "Iceland-poems". To some extent Eggert was influenced by contemporary European ideas of nature. Rousseau, whose work was influential in Denmark, and whom Eggert undoubtedly knew of, saw nature primarily through the eyes of the city dweller. In his Confessions he craves for the countryside with the longing of someone who had no experience of working the land. Once there, he dabbles in botany: "For I know of no study in the world so close to my natural tastes as that of plants, and the country life I have been

leading for the last ten years has been nothing but one continual botanization".[12]

Many intellectual and educated writers of the eighteenth century tended to see the countryside in similar terms, and its inhabitants as simple rustics or distant, idealised pastoral beings. In Scandinavia, the pre-Romantic poets were beginning to conceive of the countryside as an ideal landscape inspiring profound thoughts. Few of these poets had direct experience of the sweat and toil of farming. Eggert, himself a farmer's son, must have worked on the land in his youth and in his adult years could not have escaped a close contact with such work. His long stay in Denmark, however, gave him a vision of progressive farming. In his poetry, nature was depicted as essentially beneficial when managed properly. The universe moreover is ordered in such a way that man can learn from it how to go about organising his own society. Poems such as Búnaðarbálkur are above all a lesson in how man should utilise the earth that God had created for him.

Jónas Hallgrímsson, himself a natural scientist, admired Eggert primarily for his work in this field. As a natural scientist, Eggert was concerned with different aspects of Icelandic topology; mountains, glaciers,

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12 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Confessions, trans. J.M.Cohen (Penguin Books, 1845), p.175.

volcanoes and lava fields, which had been traditionally feared by the Icelanders and endowed with supernatural characteristics. Until the eighteenth century, there was in fact little nature poetry written in Icelandic. The seasons, the weather and its effect on a long-suffering population, were traditional subjects. But nature descriptions were general rather than particular, and did not develop distinctive native characteristics. Although Eddic poetry - a traditional inspiration to the versemaker - uses images which appear to reflect the character of Icelandic nature, eighteenth-century poets did not develop such imagery to any significant extent. Few poets wrote descriptive nature poetry in this period; unschooled poets in particular continued to write about the seasons and the weather. A typical eighteenth-century attitude can be found in a poem by Látra Björg Einarsdóttir (1716-84):

> Fagurt er í fjörðum,
> þá frelsarinn gefur veðrið blítt,
> hey er grænt í görðum,
> grös og heilagfiskið nýtt;
> en þá veturinn að þeim tekur sveigja,
> stað ég engan verri veit
> um veraldar reit,
> menn og dýr þá deyja.[13]

This stanza reflects very well an attitude to nature commonly expressed by unschooled poets who did not envisage any way in which they could interfere with the workings of the Almighty.

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13 Íslands þúsund ár 1600-1800, ed. Snorri Hjartarson (Reykjavík, 1947), pp.180-81.

A growing interest in the natural sciences changed the Icelander's vision of his country gradually, but profoundly. After Niels Horrebow's expedition to Iceland in 1748, numerous studies were made of the hitherto little-known flora, fauna and geology of the country. Several Icelanders contributed to this work, notably Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson whose travels resulted in a Reise igennem Island (Sorö, 1772), which was subsequently translated into various languages. Eggert wrote a long poem, "Ferðarolla", describing his extensive travels in Iceland during the fifties. To the universal horror of his countrymen, he clambered up mountains and glaciers which local people often believed shielded spirits and outlaws. One of Eggert's main concerns regarding education was to dispel such ideas, and the poem is primarily concerned with a rational explanation of natural phenomena, notably fossils and volcanic eruptions:

hér liggja kvistir í kestum,
kraup þöll fyr yfirhlaupi
fjöll timbrandi fallin
farg þolir í seltu bjargi.

(Kvæði, p.95)

In "Tvídægra", however, the landvættir - used also by Jónas Hallgrímsson in "Gunnarshólmi" - represent the country's good qualities, its history and culture that the people neglect at their peril. The poem describes a visit to an imaginary land where a degenerate race of people subsist exclusively on catching butterflies. It is clearly a satire, albeit ferocious rather than light-hearted, on

Icelandic society and its lack of social virtues - possibly inspired by Holberg's Niels Klim. Unlike Jónas who was concerned with a metaphysical relationship between man and the native soil, Eggert's main theme is moral and social duty; yet the similarity in ideas is striking. Whereas Jónas's poem has a tone of sadness, Eggert's biblical imagery conveys the wrath of God when the Children of Israel worshipped the Golden Calf:

> Goð í reiði gegna:
> galdir fölsku kálfar
> álög fái föst.
> dökkar dýsir hegna
> dragi svartir álfar
> at þeim kýngi-köst.

(Kvæði, p.138)

Another aspect of Eggert's nature poetry was an emphasis on utility, which need not have originated in Enlightened ideas about farming. In the occasional stanza, unschooled poets often conveyed similar notions. Eggert's interest, however, was at once more consistent and considered; but there was nothing new in the way he described the coming of spring in "Íslands-sæla":

> Sólin rennr hýr í heiði,
> hverfr burtu þögn og leiði;
> hauðrið gyllir, hnoðrum eyðir,
> hlær þá flest í geði manns.

(Kvæði, p.119)

Ordered emotions characterise most of Eggert's nature poetry, notably Búnaðarbálkur. Observing nature the young man interprets the busy life of the birds, feeding and mating, as a world of order and decorum, a notion that was

quite alien to the Romantic poet. In spite of this almost schematic view of nature, and the fact that some of his poetry is rather turgid and archaic, it sometimes evokes a delightful sense of joy. Even the relentless didacticism of Búnaðarbálkur allows an occasional relief. Imagery such as "blærinn hýrnar" and the quaint "náttúran stígr vikivaka" is vividly reminiscent of Sigurður Breiðfjörð's quatrains.

Eggert was the first Icelandic poet to convey patriotism in nature poetry. He wrote what is perhaps the first image of Iceland as the fjallkona, tall, white and icy:

> Uppteyg höfut þat it háfa,
> hvítföldut jökli köldum
> móðurjörð úr marsvæði,
>
> (Kvæði, p.74)

Presenting Iceland as a person with distinctive characteristics became central to nationalistic poetry. This particular image was in fact elaborated on by the "exiled" student poets in Copenhagen; and later, especially in 1874, unschooled poets adopted it with several variations. In "Mánamál" and "Ferðarolla" Eggert began to associate certain places with historical figures and events, another important way in which later poets combined the two main national symbols, nature and the Golden Age. These features did not dominate Eggert's poetry, nor were they linked with nationalism in his work.

In "Heimsótt" Eggert deals with "girnd útlendra manna að vitja aptr föðurlandsins, einkum Íslendinga og annara, sem á fjöllóttum löndum eru aldir" (Kvæði, p.116). The poem perpetrates the notion that the motherland has a hold on its children and implies that certain kinds of topology, notably mountains and rugged landscapes, have great power. But he makes no attempt to explain this in terms of roots or psychological need:

> Auðlegð dregr ekki mig
> Íslands til að vitja,
> elligar sælan yndislig,
> er eg hugsi að nytja;
> .....
> heldr að fá að faðma þig,
> foldar prýdda þaungum .
>
> (Kvæði, p.118)

His own love of Iceland, shared by others, is something of a puzzle to Eggert. Why, he asks in the poem, do we want to go back home when we are "mitt í sælu staddir stað"? Perhaps, he goes on, it is simply óvit. In Brúðkaupsiðabók he argues that when the forefathers were outlawed they chose death rather than leave the land of their birth. Although this sentiment is apparently indistinguishable from the notion expressed in Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Gunnarshólmi", Eggert does not provide mystical reasons for this phenomenon. He argues simply that all decent men, notably the ancient Icelanders, love the fatherland and their countrymen above aliens. This dictum is proved by the action of all great men in history who "hafa elskað sitt föðurland hvað mest og ei sparað þessvegna fje eða

framkvæmd, líf eða blóð".[14]

Eighteenth-century patriotism was as much a feeling of loyalty to kith and kin as love of country. Hannes Finnsson, after spending ten enjoyable years in Copenhagen, felt tempted to accept a permanent position in Denmark - ""glæsilega stöðu hjá kónglegum mönnum". In a letter home he explains his reasons for declining the offer:

> væri það ekki hróplegt vanþakklæti við velgerðarmenn sína, ættingja (foreldra) og jafnvel ættlandið sjálft, að snúa fyrir fullt og alt bakinu við þeim, sem þó fullnægja þörfum manns? Og hvílíkt hverflyndi mætti það vera, að leggja í heil tíu ár stund á þau fræði, er eingöngu geta komið ættlandinu að haldi, og gera svo jafnharðan þessi fræði ónýt öllum með því að takast á hendur með erlendum þjóðum einhvern starfa, sem þeim væri með öllu ósamrýmanlegur. En hvað er þá ættjarðarást, þessi æðsta skylda? Það er ást á föður sínum, móður sinni og ættingjum sínum; það er 4. boðorðið, hið eina, sem fyrirheit hefir. 15

It is clear that this concept of ættjarðarást differs fundamentally from that of the Romantic poets. The meaning of the word ættjörð, literally "the land of the family" describes eighteenth-century patriotism very well. It incorporated a duty to family and even responsibility to class that had, by the end of the nineteenth century, become obscured by an emphasis on national unity.

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14 Quoted in Íslenzk endurreisn, II, 389.

15 Jón Helgason, Hannes Finnsson (Reykjavík, 1936), p.49.

Although the nationalist poets inherited a number of their ideas from Eggert Ólafsson and paid him tribute as a patriot, his style of writing must have been some embarrassment to such as Jónas Hallgrímsson. Jónas in fact avoided a mention of Eggert's poetry and concentrated on praising him as a natural scientist and a patriot. The introduction Eggert wrote for his Kvæði illustrates his attitude to poetry. "Skáldskaparkonstin", he argued, "er ei annað en sú efsta trappa mælskukonstarinnar, og tilgángr og nytsemi skálda og mælindismanna á að vera allr hinn sami, sem sé: að hræra mannlig hjörtu og draga þau til samsýnis sér" (Kvæði, p. 2). Eggert's belief in the utility of all writing, including poetry, was not in practice at odds with the nineteenth-century þjóðskáld, who held very different ideas about poetry. Several of their poems were written directly in the service of the national "awakening". Eggert was at one with his successors in showing concern for the language. He argued that form should match content and that over-elaborate rhyme and alliteration was a dangerous sport. Yet he usually failed to observe the decorum that this maxim required, and was above all interested in the subject-matter of his poetry. Consequently some of his poems tend to resemble rhymed essays or versified scientific discourses, albeit never lacking in ideas and passion.

Like the Danish-educated poets of the nineteenth century, Eggert's attitude to foreign influence on

Icelandic culture was paradoxical. He advocated that the Icelanders should be entirely self-sufficient, and even conducted his own wedding in what he felt was a pure Icelandic manner - which included wearing clothes wholly made of Icelandic raw materials. Profoundly concerned with the contamination of the language by foreign words, Eggert characteristically wrote a poem descriptively named "Sótt og dauði Íslenzkunnar". At the same time he was one of the most cosmopolitan Icelanders of his time. A true polymath, he mastered several ancient and modern languages and studied a great variety of subjects and up-to-date topics. In Búnaðarbálkur he blames those who condemn everything Icelandic:

> Af því sem heima guð þeim gefr
> góðu og þörfu fyrir eingan prís,
> ósmekkur finnst og illr þefr;
> eins og það væri flær og lýs,

(Kvæði, p.45)

But he was angered by the sullen reception given to the suggestion that the Icelandic farmer ought to engage in horticulture. Their parochialism and lack of interest in progress is depicted as a rejection of the established knowledge of civilised people:

> Siðuðum þjóðum enn eru öllum
> ávextir slíkir dagligt brauð;
> því hlæ eg rétt að rustaköllum
> er reikna þá gras er auki frauð
> eins og hvert flónið af þeim sé
> áminnstum þjóðum vitrari.

(Kvæði, p.43)

In the last four years of his life Eggert's poetry

conveys a new tone of uncertainty. In several poems he looks back on his life's work with unusual introspection, and finds nothing there to satisfy his apparent need for spiritual comfort. This is demonstrated particularly well in "Viðrkenníngarsálmr" (1768) where even science holds no promise of enlightenment. Like his unschooled contemporaries, Eggert turns to the Almighty. The poem is strikingly out of tune with his earlier confident pursuit of practical solutions to Iceland's many problems, and his characteristic condemnation of social ills. This self-depreciation - "ónýtt er vit og orka mín" - pious confession and doubt can hardly be explained by the fact that after twenty years of relative freedom, Eggert was tied to a profession in a poor and remote country. Already in the seventeen-fifties he was greatly interested in the writing of the Spanish Jesuit Balthasar Gracian, whose work included a guide to right moral conduct. Eggert translated fragments from one of his books on the subject and wrote a poem in praise of the author. Eggert's poetry as a whole reveals a passionate striving to reach elusive spiritual and material goals and irrepressible energy, which perhaps contributed to his popularity during the national "awakening".

PART TWO

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL SYMBOLS

CHAPTER 3

"Natural Culture" in the Poetry of Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrímsson

In the account of his European travels in 1832-34, Tómas Sæmundsson (1801-41) described Herder's Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit as "djúpsærustu og hæstu athugasemdir yfir veraldarsöguna sem til eru á þýzku." Herder's work - all forty-five volumes - are "þægiliga í stíl færð og öllum auðskilin, löguð til að bæta smekkinn og upplýsa skynsemina, leiða og grundvalla hennar dóma, vekja föðurlandsást og elsku til alls þess sem falligt er og gott."[1] Although Herder's writing may not have been widely read in Iceland, it is certain that he indirectly influenced notions about nature in nationalistic poetry. In Ideen Herder associated the origins of distinct national cultures with climate and geography.[2] In a passage on pagan Scandinavia he

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1 Ferðabók, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík, 1947), p.112.

2 Simple climatic theories were common before the eighteenth century: Christopher Hill, for example, discussing the climatic theories of Milton, suggests that they were the "stalest of chestnuts in the seventeenth century." See Milton and the English Revolution (London, 1977), pp.6-7.

described how a rigorous climate and unproductive environment had determined the character and history of the Northern peoples, creating societies in perfect harmony with nature. This equilibrium, or state of "natural culture" had been perverted by an invasion of an alien culture:

> Nothing tended so much to suppress this mode of life of the northern nations as christianity, by which the heroic religion of Odin was totally subverted. ... What disposition could these inhabitants of the islands and mountains of the north entertain for the articles of faith and canonical precepts of a hierarchical system, which overturned all the tales of their forefathers, subverted the manner of their country, and, poor as their land was, rendered them the tributary slaves of an ecclesiastical court in distant Italy 3

In Germany, Herder's concept of a "natural culture" - motivated in part by his professed desire to re-establish the significance of Germany in European history - became a linchpin in the Romantic's ideas of nature. It made a strong impact on Schelling who developed his own Naturphilosophie, which depended less on genetic or a historical approach. His ideas were extremely complex and wide in scope, yet his influence on Scandinavian poetry rests primarily on a simple notion. From Herder he inherited the idea that there was an all-embracing unity in nature. At the centre of his Naturphilosophie is a belief in an essentially harmonious universe where all natural phenomena are "interwoven into a great

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3 Johann G. von Herder, Outline of a Philosophy of the History of Man, trans. W.T.Churchill (London, 1800), pp.553-4.

interdependent whole."[4] These ideas were made popular in Denmark in 1802 by the Norwegian born philosopher Henrich Steffens, a friend and disciple of Schelling. His lectures in Copenhagen University were attended by scientists, poets, young students and the intelligensia. The Danish poet Oehlenschläger was particularly enthusiastic about Steffen's ideas, which influenced some of his major works. Like the Romantic philosophers, Scandinavian poets strove to show that man and nature were closely united. This tended to undermine the importance of traditional notions about a divinely ordained hierarchy in nature. Predominantly sincere if unorthodox Christians, the Romantics had not set out to challenge the traditional notion of one all-powerful God. Yet, by endowing non-human nature with spiritual qualities and - particularly in poetry - with independent semi-divine existence, their work acquired overtones of pantheism, although few actually embraced such beliefs.

Although Romanticism had a lasting influence in Iceland, it was never clearly outlined in prose. The dearth of philosophical writing in the period 1830-74 meant that the movement was sporadic, and manifested at first only in a few poems and articles. Danish-educated poets were clearly particularly enamoured of the new

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4 Quoted in Joseph L. Esposito, Schelling's Idealism and Philosophy of Nature (Lewisburgh, 1977), p.92.

emphasis on nature in the Romantic philosophies, which were fashionable in literary circles during Bjarni Thorarensen's student days in Copenhagen. Bjarni has been regarded as Iceland's first Romantic poet primarily because of his subject-matter - heroic valour, patriotism, nature and metaphysical love-poems. He was recognised by his compatriots as a þjóðskáld when "Íslands minni" and "Ísland" first appeared in print, respectively in 1818 and 1820. "Íslands minni" was written in Copenhagen and expresses the poet's longing for his native land. The well-worn topic belies the originality of Bjarni's nature description:

> Öðruvís er að sjá
> á þér hvítfaldinn há
> heiðhimin við,
> eða þær kristalls ár,
> á hvörjar sólin gljár,
> og heiðar himin-blár,
> há-jökla rið.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 27-28)

The poem reflects a very slight resemblance to the nature imagery in Eggert Ólafsson's "Ísland". Yet, whereas Eggert's description of the landscape has no relevance to the rest of his poem - even contradicts its theme - Bjarni's nature imagery is an integral part of his subject-matter. He creates an image of Iceland through a general and idealised description which aims to achieve an impression of grandeur and majesty. The focal point is the elevation of the land, a clear sky and cool crystal water reflecting the sun. The harsh and barren landscape and the completely static scene evokes a sense of remoteness.

It is tempting to see "Ísland" as a sequel to "Íslands minni" and the climax to Bjarni's patriotic nature poetry.[5] Movement and force are added to the static scene which nevertheless retains its majesty:

> Undarlegt samband af frosti og funa,
> fjöllum og sléttum og hraunum og sjá;
> fagurt og ógurlegt ertu þá brunar
> eldur að fótum þín jöklunum frá.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 56)

Bjarni was the first poet to depict the Icelandic landscape as beautiful yet terrible. He implicitly associated patriotism with aesthetic appreciation of the native land. Like Eggert he usually personified Iceland as a female: mother, nurse or the fjallkona. Significantly "Ísland" is an exception. The country is given divine rather than human attributes - even the power to create life: "landið sem lífið oss veittir." Through its nature and its influence on the people's character the country protects them from evil. The evil is vellyst, and læpuskaps ódyggðir, and is alien to the land itself. Vellyst arrives in ship's cargoes with rats and can only survive in towns where foreign culture dominates and the native climate apparently has a limited impact:

> því útfyrir kaupstaði íslenzkt í veður
> ef hún sér vogar, þá frýs hún í hel.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I,56)

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5 The dates of these poems have not been conclusively established. "Íslands minni" was written in Copenhagen probably between 1809 and 1811 and "Ísland" sometime between 1811 and 1818 (Ljóðmæli, II, 40, 61).

It has been suggested that "Ísland" depicts Iceland as a Garden of Eden where the good and simple life is preserved, especially in:[6]

> bægi sem kerúb með sveipanda sverði
> silfurblár Ægir oss kveifarskap frá.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 56)

The biblical connection is indeed strong and clearly influenced Bjarni's particular vision of utopia. It is not, however, a description of a pastoral "valley of bliss", nor does it resemble Eggert's ordered and rational sæludalur. Bjarni's ideal world incorporated his passion for the heroic in the medieval past, as it was understood from literature, and his essential pessimism about the human character. Significantly the metaphor draws equally on Norse mythology and Scripture. Bjarni's religious views throw some light on his concept of Iceland's "natural culture". A sincere Christian, his beliefs appear idiosyncratic, combining a strange mixture of Protestantism and paganism as interpreted by the Romantics from Sagas and myth.[7] In his superb elegies on dead friends and relatives, Bjarni tended, particularly in his earlier poetry, to divide man's existence into two completely unrelated spheres separated by death. After death, Christian forgiveness

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6 A.P. Pearson, Critical Studies in Icelandic Nature Poetry, unpublished thesis (University of London, 1970), p.192.

7 Bjarni rarely mentions religion in his correspondence, but regarded himself as an orthodox, as opposed to a rational, believer. Therefore, it was a great surprise to him to be occasionally branded as an atheist (Bréf, ed. Jón Helgason, Copenhagen, 1943, p.95).

reigns supreme. In ljósheimar drottins all men could expect eternal joy without apparently fear of retribution. On earth, where existence was a continual struggle, man had to pay for his sin - partly by observing harsh laws and traditions - and fight heroically for his comforts.

There is a peculiar parallel in Bjarni's religious views and his ideas about North and South - not clearly defined concepts but basically geographical - propounded particularly clearly in "Suðurlönd og Norðurlönd" and "Veturinn". The people of the North are the children of the Northern Lights and winter. They are strong and virtuous, whereas the Southerners, the offsprings of the sun, are pleasure-loving, gentle and weak. Like heaven and earth the two worlds are totally separate; they are opposites that can never meet, as the Northerners find out to their peril when they venture South.

Although Bjarni's notion of "natural culture" reflects his originality as a poet, it demonstrates that he was very aware of contemporary literature in Scandinavia, particularly Denmark. His ideas may have been inspired directly by his favourite foreign poet, Oehlenschläger, who rose to fame after the turn of the century.[8] Oehlenschläger's poetic drama, Hakon Jarl hin

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8 The influence of Oehlenschläger's work on Bjarni's nature poetry is discussed in Þorleifur Hauksson, Endurteknar myndir í kveðskap Bjarna Thorarensen, Studia Islandica, 27 (Reykjavík, 1968), pp.25-7.

Rige, which had its premier during Bjarni's stay in Copenhagen, contains related ideas about nature's influence on man. The play, freely based on an episode in Heimskringla, deals with a struggle between Hakon and Olaf Tryggvason; the contest between the two men is symbolic of a conflict between two spiritual worlds, that of the heathen Nordic gods and Christianity. The work reflects nature determinism in the idea that the physical world influences man's spiritual development. Thus religion, he argues:

> Kan dog vel ikke kaldes andet, end
> En egen, synderlig Tilböilighed,
> En Drift, som hæver Kraften i vor Siel
> Mod det usynlige, det store Udspring;
> En Drift, som er forskiellig efter Væsnet
> Den virker paa; forskiellig efter Tiden
> Den virker i; forskiellig som Naturen. 9

The play presents Christianity, notably Catholicism, as unnatural and alien to the North. Southern landscape and Christianity are of a kind:

> I Sydens Dal, der er det anderledes,
> Der flade sig de stive, smekkre Löv
> I runde, blöde Blade. Stammen kneiser
> Ey længer der med ranke Skud fra Jorden;
> Den bukker sig i fromme Krumninger
> Mörkt under Hvælvingen. Omtrent saaledes
> Som dine Munke, naar de holder Messe. 10

In "Veturinn" and "Suðurlönd og Norðurlönd" Bjarni is also concerned with the difference between North and South. Yet he differs from Oehlenschläger in that he

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9 Adam Oehlenschläger, Hakon Jarl hin Rige (Copenhagen, 1946), pp.92-3.

10 Ibid., p.93.

presents the ancient heroic virtues as exclusively Icelandic. Iceland is depicted as the last bastion of the medieval Nordic values which many Scandinavian Romantics praised in their poetry. Although he wrote many sincere tributes to the Danish Royal House, Bjarni always describes Denmark as soft, weak and even corrupt. In "Sjáland og Ísland" this is explained by the Dane's lack of resistance to an influx from alien Southern cultures. Ships from exotic lands - the Orient - bring a plague, sweet poison and gold:

> Skipin fögru færa sótt
> fyllt með eitri sætu
> frá eystri heimsins álfum skjótt
> auðgum gulli mætu.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 7)

In 1808 Bjarni complained to a friend that the sultry Danish climate had made cowards of the men and sluts of the women:

> at hefir hið hlýja
> og hallkvæma veður
> bleyður af brögnum,
> bryðjur af fljóðum,
> dugleysi af dugnað
> Dönum of skapað.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, II, 23)

These intemperate words, however, were later deleted from the poem with the comment: "þetta líkar mér ekki og vil ek að þat sé sem óskrifað" (Ljóðmæli, II, 23).

Oehlenschläger saw the essential difference between North and South not simply as the traditional one of weakness and strength. He depicted the Northern

landscape as free and therefore subservience was alien to the character of its people. Bjarni´s Iceland-image incorporates characteristics of the Romantic notion of "free nature" but this is not extended to human freedom. To justify his strong aversion to democratic governments, Bjarni explained to a friend that this was contrary to nature "hvor den ene Kraft er begrændset ved den anden."[11] Bjarni did not embrace the idea that the whole of nature was one force, but rather developed an image of the land itself, Iceland, as a superior power. In "Ísland" the country taught the various moral virtues - strength, determination, courage and perseverance - that were needed to survive in the North. Man is depicted as passive, and essentially weak. Bjarni´s Iceland-image was therefore of necessity wintry and severe:

> Fjör kenni´ oss eldurinn, frostið oss herði,
> fjöll sýni torsóktum gæðum að ná;
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 56)

But the determined rhythm is deceptive; these are not certainties but hopes and dreams. There is an uneasy tone in the poem reflecting Bjarni´s lack of faith in his idealised vision of the country. Like the heathen gods, it is not almighty and may fail to teach and protect the people from evil influences and weakness within themselves. In the earliest manuscript of the poem the solution to the problem of how to preserve the inherent purity of

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11 Bréf, p.19.

the country was to cast out the weak who could not adjust to its high standards:

> þína við kosti sá ekki vill una
> óskum við sjálfir að losni þér frá.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, II, 61)

A later manuscript, and the version Bjarni had printed in 1819, offers no such compromise:

> En megnirðu ei börn þín frá vondu að vara,
> og vesöld með ódyggðum þróast þeim hjá,
> aftur í legið þitt forna þá fara
> föðurland! áttu, - og hníga í sjá.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 56)

Undoubtedly inspired by Völuspá, the poem differs fundamentally in that Bjarni cannot envisage a future after the ragnarök. Where the ancient poet had seen a new beginning - "Sér hon upp koma / öðru sinni / jörð ór ægi / iðjagræna"[12] - there Bjarni recognises only a void.

Bjarni's patriotic poetry belongs to the mood of his Copenhagen years when he was isolated from the social and economic realities in Iceland and before patriotism began to acquire political overtones. After the thirties his position became increasingly ambiguous, leaving him open to attacks on all fronts. Through his support of many of the issues that were fought for by his younger educated compatriots, he was regarded as sympathetic to change. Yet his links with the emerging nationalist movement were

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12 Eddukvæði, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), I, 20.

tenuous. Even Tómas Sæmundsson - whom Bjarni regarded as the most promising talent of the new generation - was publicly critical of his failure to employ his poetic genius to serve the motherland.[13] A royalist who freely expressed his deference and support of the absolute monarchy, Bjarni detested the enlightened social liberalism and cosmopolitan views assumed by some of his like-minded contemporaries. His Iceland-image - especially in "Ísland" - served almost as a native substitute for paternalism and order which were the aspects of the monarchy that he wanted to preserve.

After his home-coming, Bjarni began to depict Icelandic nature as destructive and fearsome. Struggling with the climate and the population as a farmer and an officer of the Crown, his attitude to nature became gradually more traditional. As a farmer he placed his trust in God:

> Einn á báti útí hafi
> eg sit hér við norðurpól,
> mín vill kænan mara í kafi,
> megn er stormur, engin sól.
>
> Enn á bátnum ekkert brast,
> ef eg sækí róðurinn fast
> faðir storma forðar grandi
> og fleytir öllu heilu að landi!
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 168)

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13 Tómas Sæmundsson, Island fra den intellektuelle Side betragtet (Copenhagen, 1832), p.13.

When a young relative was drowned in the South of Iceland, he no longer saw the terrible aspects of the country as a source of moral virtue:

> Forðastu að ríða þann feigðar um sand,
> í fjallinu er Katla, og ætlar þér grand,
> kaldhlátur dauðra þar gellur í gjá,
> en grátandi Skaptafells landvættir tjá
> 'Æ hví dó hann Öefiord svo ungur'.

(Ljóðmæli, I, 129)

Although the nature poetry of Jónas Hallgrímsson may be seen as a continuation of Bjarni's "Iceland-poems", particularly the imagery in "Íslands minni", there are few parallels in their attitudes to nature. Before he entered Copenhagen University in 1832, Jónas had written several accomplished poems, significantly using and adapting metres from the Edda. His first truly nationalistic poem is "Ísland". Written for the inaugural issue of Fjölnir in 1835, it accords well with its aims and sentiments. The emphasis is primarily on the unique and unchanging beauty of the land and the matching character and lifestyle of the early Icelanders. A similar theme had in fact appeared in a poem written by Bjarni to a friend as early as 1813:

> Söm er hún Esja,
> samur er Keilir,
> eins er Skjaldbreið
> og á Ingólfs dögum,
> en þegiðu vinur
> þó ég segi
> að mý nú mori þar
> milli fjalla
> er skatnar skjaldbúnir
> skálmir hristu.

(Ljóðmæli, I, 41-42)

Bjarni's tongue-in-cheek approach to the subject is in sharp contrast to Jónas's earnest plea to his compatriots, imploring them to follow the example of their forefathers:

> Ó, þér unglinga fjöld
> og Íslands fullorðnu synir:
> Svona er feðranna frægð
> fallin í gleymsku og dá!
>
> (Rit, I, 42)

Two years later Jónas wrote "Gunnarshólmi",[14] a far more complex and sophisticated treatment of the same theme. The poem draws inspiration from an episode in Njáls saga where the outlawed brothers, Gunnar and Kolskeggur, ride to the ship which is to carry them abroad. As Gunnar's horse stumbles, he inadvertently glanced back towards his home at Hlíðarendi. Gunnar's decision to risk death rather than leave his country captured the imagination of nineteenth-century nationalists, as did his oft quoted words: "Fögr er hlíðin, svá mér hefir hún aldri jafnfögr sýnzkt". Thinking of Jónas's nature poetry notably "Gunnarshólmi", J.C.Poestion remarked that "Die Naturbeschreibung steht in der Dichtung Jónas Hallgrímssons so sehr im Vordergrunde, dass sie sich auch dort geltend macht, wo den Anforderungen einer künstlerischen Komposition zufolge das Schwergewicht auf den inneren Kern der Dichtung zu

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14 There are numerous discussions of this poem in literary histories and criticism, notably in Kvæðafylgsni, pp.46-73.

legen wäre."[15] This not uncommon view is only relevant if the poem´s aim is primarily to relate the story of Gunnar. Surprisingly perhaps, Jónas did not write poetry specifically about historical characters or events. In "Gunnarshólmi", the relationship between nature and the people is the central theme. The name of the poem is significant, but it is above all the structure which reveals its intention. Sixty-six lines, which employ the same metre, are divided into two parts. The first is devoted to the land as it was in the past without a hint or forboding of the ensuing drama which unfolds in the second part. The story of Gunnar is told simply without a break in the attention to nature, culminating in the traditional ending "svo er Gunnars saga". But the poem has not reached its climax; it changes to a new metre and the first person singular. In this last part the poet propounds the message which ties the poem together.

"Gunnarshólmi", like most of Jónas´s nature poems, is in part simply a tribute to Icelandic nature. It has his typically exuberant combinations of colours and striking images associated with myth and folklore. The landscape emerges as a diffuse panorama of bareness, vegetation and wildlife. The breathless effect of the terza-rima - used here for the first time in Icelandic - highlights the

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15 J.C.Poestion, Islandische Dichter der Neuzeit (Leipzig, 1897), pp.354-55.

appearance of disorder. But the initial confusion is deceptive and a closer look reveals a detailed and realistic, if dramatic description recognised by the observant traveller.[16] In the first part, all natural phenomena exist in perfect harmony. In the second, Gunnar responds to the land with the instinctive knowledge that it must be respected. By using the example of Gunnar to make this point, Jónas made sure of the sympathy of his audience. Significantly Gunnar is not presented in his more familiar role as the hero who could jump his height in full armour and "brandish three swords" at once, nor does the poem deal with the popular episode describing his heroic death - the main subject in a rímur written by Sigurður Breiðfjörð in the previous year. Jónas uses a popular character to create a new hero: the patriot who gives his life for the motherland. A figure who may not have appealed to the original Saga audience, who perhaps recognised Gunnar's disregard of the laws as morally suspect.

The poem ends by demonstrating that the land responds to human acts:

> Þar sem að áður akrar huldu völl,
> ólgandi þverá veltur yfir sanda;
> sólroðin líta enn hin öldnu fjöll
> árstrauminn harða fögrum dali granda;
> flúinn er dvergur, dáin hamra-tröll,
> dauft er í sveitum, hnípin þjóð í vanda;
>
> (Rit, I, 52)

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16 Kvæðafylgsni, pp.46-73.

The neglect of the country has released destructive forces that threaten the equilibrium in nature. But all is not lost: the traditional guardians of the country have left but there still remains the essence of Gunnar's Christ-like sacrifice:

> en lágum hlífir hulinn verndar-kraftur
> hólmanum, þar sem Gunnar snéri aftur.
>
> (Rit, I, 53)

The notion that there existed a spiritual relationship between the people and the land had great appeal to Jónas's educated contemporaries. Even such an eminently practical man as Tómas Sæmundsson suggested in Island fra den intellektuelle Side betragtet that superficial ideals of material wealth were alien to Icelandic nature. Being essentially solemn and serious, it disposes the inhabitants towards higher spiritual goals in order to preserve its own unique character. Although the Icelanders traditionally believed that their country was inhabited by supernatural beings such as elfs, trolls and the like, this had only a remote resemblance to the Romantics' notion of the quintessential force in nature.

Jónas clearly felt that Iceland must be presented in a favourable light but without minimising its obvious and deeply felt disadvantages. Taken as a whole his nature poetry can be seen as a struggle with this problem. In a short impromptu verse written in 1829 to the Norwegian

historian, Rudolf Keyser, some characteristic features of his Iceland-image begin to emerge:

> þó landa hringur bylgjum blám
> ey vora í faðmi feli víðum,
> .....
> mundu þá samt, að eitt það er
> ígildi snoturt fegri rósa,
> 'Gleymdu-mér-ei', sem grær eins hér
> á grundu kaldri norðurljósa.

(Rit, I, 8)

Iceland's notherly aspect and isolation are present but not dominant. Where Bjarni's image of the country was wintry, Jónas tended, particularly in his later poetry, to bring its delicate vegetation to the fore, thus creating an image at once more realistic and less original than the former's frostrósir and helblómstur. Jónas's Iceland-image,however,is often reminiscent of Bjarni's "Íslands minni". It has the same dignity, majesty and at times aloofness:

> Í höfum norður
> við himin gnæfir
> eyja ísi skyggnd
> og eldi þrungin;

(Rit, I, 54)

It has fire, ice, towering mountains and cold rivers, but the impact of a wide panorama of a static landscape is always softened by the metre, gentle movements or, more frequently, by green vegetation:

> landið lofthåa
> og ljósbeltaða,
> þar sem um grænar
> grundir líða
> elfur ísbláar
> að ægi fram.

(Rit, I, 56)

Jónas's Iceland-image appears in a variety of poems, notably commemorating events such as departure of friends to and from Iceland and in obituaries. Here it is presented as a symbol of patriotism, expressing affection for the motherland which is highlighted by his address, usually feminine - fósturjörð, móðurmold - and often endearing - gamla móðir, hólminn gamli. The most important aspect of Icelandic nature in Jónas's "Ísland" is its beauty. Whereas Bjarni Thorarensen described Iceland as "fagurt og ógurlegt", Jónas tended to see the country as "fagurt og frítt".

The use of the word fagur and Jónas's combinations of words to describe nature set something of a fashion in nationalistic poetry. This emphasis on beauty evoked a reaction from the followers of the realist movement later in the century, who criticised Jónas and the later Romantic poets for concentrating on aesthetic appreciation of the landscape rather than facing the real problems in Icelandic society. In many ways, however, the Romantics conceived their poetry as a practical education. They argued that beauty had a fundamental role in all aspects of life. This is clearly demonstrated in the aims of Fjölnir, outlined in its first issue by Tómas Sæmundsson. Beauty he argues, "er sameinuð nytseminni - að svo miklu leiti sem það sem fagurt er ætíð er til nota, andliga eða líkamliga - eða þá til eblingar nytseminni."[17] Beauty and utility

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17 Fjölnir, I, 1835, 10-11.

were closely associated by the Fjölnir group. What Jónas put forward in his "Iceland-poems" was primarily that nature's influence on the prosperity and independence of the Golden Age must be understood rather than simply felt. In a letter to a friend, he expressed the need for a systematic teaching of natural science and history in Iceland, "höfum við ekki sagt, að landið er fagurt og frítt, ... En hver skilur fegurðina, nema hann geti notið náttúrunnar jafnframt af viti og þekkingu" (Rit, II, 172). This view is very characteristic of Jónas who rarely sought personal consolation in his nature poetry. For him the beauty of the country was apparently a special gift to the Icelanders. It was both functional, in a Romantic understanding of the word, and had supreme value in its own right.

Jónas's nature poetry is popularly associated not only with beautiful scenery, but also with spring and summer. This view of his work derives from the more popular poems which expressed a deep love of the light season:

> Nú er vetur úr bæ,
> rann í sefgrænan sæ
> og þar sefur í djúpinu væra;
> en sumarið blítt
> kemur fagurt og frítt
> meður fjörgjafar-ljósinu skæra.
>
> (Rit, I, 59)

During a period of ill-health and poverty in Reykjavík, where he stayed in the winters of 1839-42, Jónas suffered

from acute depression that subsequently recurred at the onset of winter.[18] His "Andvökusálmur" conveys an intense hatred of the dark and winter which is a common feature in his later poetry:

> Myrkrið er manna fjandi,
> meiðir það líf og sál,
> sídimmt og síþegjandi
> svo sem helvítis bál
> gjörfullt með gys og tál.
> Veit ég, að vondur andi
> varla í þessu landi
> sveimar um sumarmál.
>
> (Rit, I, 111)

Although such feelings emerge mostly in poems expressing private emotions, there is a parallel in Jónas's nature poetry. An imminent threat is often apparent in the landscape. In a poem (1830) to the French scientist Paul Gaimard, this is presented in the figure of Loki:

> en Loki bundinn beið í gjótum
> bjargstuddum undir jökulrótum.
>
> (Rit, I, 57)

In "Víti" - a poem about an awesome explosive crater in the interior of Iceland - this dark force is separate, even alien to the land itself:

> Hrollir hugur við polli
> heitum í blárri veitu. -
> Krafla með kynja afli
> klauf fjall og rauf hjalla.
> Grimm eru í djúpi dimmu
> dauða-org, þaðan er rauðir
> logar yfir landið bljúga
> leiddu hraunið seydda.
>
> (Rit, I, 65)

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18 In a letter to Jón Sigurðsson, dated 15th December, 1844, Jónas confessed that he had suffered acute depression every winter since his illness in Iceland (Rit, II, 95).

In "Ísland" and "Gunnarshólmi", Jónas - like Eggert Ólafsson - indirectly blamed the people's apathy for the conditions of the country. In this mood he wrote a poem in memory of Þorsteinn Helgason (1840):

> Veit þá enginn, að eyjan hvíta
> á sér enn vor, ef fólkið þorir
> guði að treysta, hlekki að hrista,
>
> (Rit, I, 103)

But the tone has changed, it is more political and less accusing than before; there is no doubt about the future:

> Fagur er dalur og fyllist skógi
> og frjálsir menn, þegar aldir renna;
>
> (Rit, I, 103)

After 1840, Jónas's nature poetry became more optimistic and spirited, contradicting apparent personal disappointments and ill-health. In 1841 he wrote "Fjallið Skjaldbreiður", where he finally achieves a synthesis between the beauty and terror in the Icelandic landscape. Inspired by his exploration of the lava field at Þingvellir, this is one of the most outstanding nature poems of the period. It is based on contemporary knowledge of geology and familiarity with the landscape. Combining scientific detachment with Romantic notions about nature within a firmly controlled structure, the poem makes a clear distinction between reality and imaginative speculation, lending the latter peculiar plausibility. Probing the origins of Þingvellir the poet uses the mountain as a focus of attention. He imagines the beginnings of an eruption:

Titraði jökull, æstust eldar,
öskraði djúpt í rótum lands;

(Rit, I, 93)

The vegetation is destroyed and the land upturned:

Belja rauðar blossa móður,
blágrár reykur yfir sveif,
undir hverfur runni, rjóður,
reyni-stóð í hárri kleif.
Blómin ei þá blöskrun þoldu,
blikna hvert í sínum reit,

(Rit, I, 94)

As in "Víti", the land is assaulted by a separate power, but here destruction signifies new creation:

Djúpið mæta, mest á Fróni,
myndast á í breiðri sveit.

(Rit, I, 94)

Although freedom was a feature of Bjarni's Iceland-image, Jónas was the first poet to use "free nature" as a weapon in nationalism. He did this partly by using Þingvellir - traditionally associated with the Commonwealth - as a symbol encapsulating the qualities of the Icelandic landscape. In many of his poems he described the country as an island, dignified and remote, and he generally emphasised those characteristics which could be associated with freedom. In "Fjallið Skjaldbreiður", Þingvellir are not simply associated with the Golden Age but acquire an eternal quality. Created by a terrible and powerful force - "gat ei nema guð og eldur / gjört svo dýrðlegt furðuverk" - Þingvellir are a gift to the people:

Svo er treyst með ógn of afli
alþjóð minni helgað bjarg;

(Rit, I, 94)

The very nature of their country makes the Icelanders a free people. The national significance is made not only by the word alþjóð, but also by a comparison with other more powerful countries:

> Hver vann hér svo að með orku?
> Aldrei neinn svo vígi hlóð;
> búinn er úr bála-storku
> bergkastali frjálsri þjóð.
>
> (Rit, I, 95)

The metaphor depicts the peculiar nature of Þingvellir in terms of defence - vígi, bergkastali - but these are no man-made edifices created by an élite to protect its power. By thus linking "free nature" with the national character or soul, Jónas added a new dimension to the concept of "natural culture". His poetry about barren and unproductive landscapes was not a personal indulgence, nor was it simply an aesthetic appreciation of nature. It was above all an attempt to give his compatriots a new interpretation of their nationality.

Coinciding with Jónas's expeditions in Iceland during the thirties and forties, there is a stylistic change in his work. After this period he writes no didactic "Iceland-poems", and on the whole abandons overtly patriotic poetry. His association between the native landscape and nationality became less obtrusive but does not disappear. On the contrary, the five years preceding his death constitute the most subtle and urgent phase in his nationalism. To this period belong his most overtly

political poems, notably "Annað kvæði um alþing". His obituaries from this period tend to be nationalistic in that the motherland is presented as the chief mourner lamenting the loss of a life because it can no longer contribute to the new beginning. The most striking example of this is the elegy in memory of Tómas Sæmundsson, an occasion of deep personal grief to Jónas. The death of a friend can be accepted, but the loss to the motherland makes a mockery of Christianity. Surely God does not act in such a meaningless and arbitrary way:

> En þá fósturfoldin hans:
> Hví vill drottinn dýrðarríkur
> duftinu varpi jafnskjótt slíkur
> andi hennar mesta manns?
> Hví vill drottinn þola það,
> landið svipta svo og reyna,
> svipta það einmitt þessum eina,
> er svo margra stóð í stað?
>
> (Rit, I, 91)

Although he wrote very little about the philosophy of science, it is clear that Jónas, like many Scandinavian scientists was strongly influenced by the German philosophies of nature - Romantic notions were reflected in the work of scientists, notably H.C.Örsted's Aanden i Naturen.[19] In an unfinished literary fragment, Jónas presents man's physical and spiritual existence as determined by his relation to nature, which operates in

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19 Örsted's discovery of electromagnetism has been attributed directly to Schelling's Naturphilosphie, and not to mere accident, see Esposito, p.137.

accordance with divinely ordained laws. These laws are shown to be complicated, even vague, but clearly do not depend on a defined hierarchy or order. Jónas argues that science is only one way in which man tries to understand himself and the world which he is a part of. The ancient literature - including Norse mythology, the Icelandic Sagas and poetry - reflects the Icelanders' strife to satisfy a universal need to understand nature in the widest meaning of the word. Literature, Jónas argued in Fjölnir, has certain features in common with the practical sciences, yet is always more difficult to understand: "Að vísu er það ekki altént svo hægt, að færa hinar fornu sagnir úr skáldahjúpnum, til að sjá, hvaða hugmynd um skapnað og eðli hlutanna hafi hvarflað þeim fyrir sjónum í hvert skipti, en auðséð er samt að þeir hafa getið mörgu furðanlega nærri."[20] Thus for Jónas literature and science have aims in common, an idea that reflects contemporary scientific methods and attitudes. Jónas's own work as a natural scientist relied almost exclusively on observation and description rather than laboratory experiments and analysis. Indeed his records and nature diaries are often quite poetic, even when he was obliged to write in Danish: "ensom, majestætisk og rolig stod Hekla, med den sorteblaa Kegle, straalende af hvide, fantastisk dannede Isplette." (Rit, III, 46)

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20 Fjölnir, I, 1835, 6.

After he returned to Denmark in 1842, Jónas wrote a series of poems - e.g. "Vorvísa", "Dalvísa", "Sláttuvísa". "Dalvísa" is a particularly good example of the mood conveyed in this work. It employs a slightly modified triolet which depends for effect on repetition of pleasing sounds. A series of delightful scenes - meadow, waterfall, brook, mountain and the sæludalur - is presented in vivid and brisk language. The relationship between the people and the land is relaxed and undemanding:

yður hjá eg alla stund
uni bezt í sæld og þrautum,

(Rit, I, 130)

Iceland is depicted as comfortable and welcoming, gently protecting its inhabitants.

"Dalvísa", although employing a metre very alien to the traditional forms, has characteristics which perhaps had an appeal for the audience of the rímur. This is even more true of "Annes and eyjar", a group of poems describing particular places in Iceland, some associated with myth, history and folklore, others of local significance only. These poems are varied in tone, incorporating humorous incidents from Jónas's travels, local anecdotes and more serious themes. The language is simple and colloquial and the form - partly inspired by Heine - resembles traditional Icelandic metres. In this period, Jónas also wrote poems about wildlife - the common birds, the seal and the fox. To some extent allegorical,

these poems depict the familiar wild creatures of the countryside for their own sake, which was a novel feature in Icelandic poetry. The great strength and lasting popularity of this later work depend on its low key. It combines simplicity of language and subject-matter with versatility and, in spite of the idealised view of the landscape in such as "Dalvísa", there are many instances of stark realism especially when depicting animals in nature. In his poetry, Jónas consciously made the familiar and everyday surroundings of the Icelanders, the subject of admiration. Combining subtle moral message with beauty of form and language Jónas created, perhaps for the first time, a truly pleasant native imagery for Icelandic nature.

A few weeks before his death, Jónas wrote a poem - probably his last - in a very different vein. Here the nationalistic message is overt rather than expressed through a subtle combination of language, form and idea. Significantly written to celebrate Jón Sigurðsson's departure to Iceland as a member of the first session of the Alþing in the summer of 1845, the poem describes an imaginary journey to Þingvellir. Jón had been the main opponent to re-establishing the Alþing at Þingvellir, a cause fought passionately by Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas. A recent interpretation of this somewhat obscure and ignored poem - perhaps because it was understood as an attack by the best-loved national poet on the father of the Republic - argues convincingly that Jónas hoped a

journey to Iceland's most sacred place would bring a change to Jón's attitude.[21] Appropriately called "Leiðarljós", the poem is in ancient metre - dróttkvætt - and adopts archaic language reminiscent of his earliest work. Written by one educated nationalist in order to influence another, the poem is unusual at a time when the trend was increasingly to use such poetry to further the "awakening" of the people. Yet it demonstrates that in 1845 an educated Icelander quite naturally worshipped land as a national deity.

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21 Kvæðafylgsni, pp. 232-43.

CHAPTER 4

The Romantic Influence 1850-74

The problem of defining Romanticism is confounded by the diverse complexity of the term even in its limited application to a historical phenomenon. During the last half century a great number of books and articles have been written on the subject where the different emphases of the national movements are reflected in a number of contrasting conclusions. Increasingly, however, there appears to be an endorsement of the view that during the period from about 1790 to 1830, Western Europe experienced "a widespread, distinct and fairly simultaneous pattern of thought, attitudes and beliefs associated with the connotation 'Romanticism' ."[1] Yet the national variations within the movement continue to provide new facets which make conclusive definitions unsatisfactory.

René Wellek, who has been described as the "champion of pan-European Romanticism",[2] has provided a synthesis

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1 René Wellek, "Romanticism Re-examined," in Northorp Fry, ed., Romanticism Reconsidered (Columbia, 1963), p.132.

2 Ibid., p.133.

incorporating the main features associated with the movement. In his essay "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History," he pointed out that in the literature described as Romantic "we find throughout Europe the same conception of poetry and of the workings and nature of the poetic imagination, the same conception of nature and its relation to man, and basically the same poetic style, with use of imagery, symbolism, and myth which is clearly distinct from that of eighteenth-century neo-classicism."[3] Wellek stressed moreover that behind Romantic poetry - particularly that of the great German, French and English poets - there was "a central creed" - namely an endeavour to overcome what he described as the split between "subject and object".

It is doubtful whether any of the national movements fit neatly into a scheme which derives its coherence from a study of a relatively few internationally recognised writers. Certainly some interpretations of Danish Romanticism - which influenced the first Icelandic Romantic poet, Bjarni Thorarensen - suggest important deviation from Wellek's overall pattern. Nevertheless Knud Bjarne Gjesing argued convincingly that the underlying philosophy of Danish Romanticism was a striving for a monistisk view of the universe, which accords rather well with Wellek's general theory. Gjesing shows that in

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3 Wellek, René, Concepts of Criticism (Yale, 1963), pp.160-61.

Danish Romanticism:

> Der er ikke tale om en dualisme mellem to af hinanden uafhængige og indbyrdes forskellige principper, en cartesiansk mellem sjæl og legeme, en kantiansk mellem noumena og fænomen, en sartresk mellem 'etre et néant', men om en duplicitet mellem skin og virkelighed, mellem ensidig fragmentarisk opfattelse og kosmisk helhedsopfattelse. ... Monisten söger ikke at fornægte dele af sit verdensbillede, men at göre det så omfattende som muligt, at indsætte ethvert fænomen i en så kompleks sammenhæng, at det fremstår som et element i det samlede kosmos. 4

Although neither Bjarni Thorarensen or Jónas Hallgrímsson attempted to present a coherent philosophy of nature in prose, their nationalistic poetry suggests similar striving to give order to complex feelings about nature. In different ways both poets regarded the land as possessing a divine force. But whereas Bjarni emphasised that Iceland's survival depended on the people's obedience to this force, Jónas believed that national freedom and the quality of the culture depended on the Icelanders' understanding of and respect for the land.

In 1847 Jónas Hallgrímsson's friends dedicated the final issue of Fjölnir to his work. Significantly the periodical also included four poems by the young Benedikt Gröndal, who is generally regarded as Iceland's most Romantic poet. With his contemporary, Gísli Brynjúlfsson and the two younger þjóðskáld of the period, Matthías Jochumsson and Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, Gröndal represents the second phase of Romantic poetry in Iceland.

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4 Den Romantiske Bevægelse (Odense, 1974), pp.23-24.

In his memoirs, written nearly half a century later, he recollected his schooldays at Bessastaðir as a period of tension and nascent political activity. He attributes this partly to the visit in 1843-44 of Grímur Thomsen (1820-98), the son of the school's steward. Although Grímur wrote most of his poetry after he settled in Iceland in 1867, he became known as a poet for his quasi-Byronic "Ólund" which appeared in Fjölnir in 1844. Not surprisingly, Grímur's sophistication and knowledge of the latest European literature - he had already published a book on modern French poetry - impressed the inexperienced young students in the homespun atmosphere at Bessastaðir. According to Gröndal's autobiography, Grímur discussed ideas of modern Continental and English writers and philosophers, and helped a group of students - including Gísli and Gröndal - to read French. Gísli's correspondence to Grímur in the following year more than confirms Gröndal's recollection of Grímur's visit.[5]

As a schoolboy, Gísli Brynjúlfsson read a great deal and was extremely impressionable. In a letter to Grímur Thomsen he described the excitement he experienced when he read Goethe's novel Die Leiden des jungen Werther - which he read in French as well as in the original. In 1848 and 1849, Gísli kept a diary and wrote the annual, Norðurfari, a remarkable periodical which lasted only for two years. Here he introduced his most popular poems,

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5 Gísli Brynjúlfsson, Dagbók í Höfn, ed., Eiríkur Hreinn Finnbogason (Reykjavík, 1951), pp.277-99.

"Faraldur" and "Grátur Jakobs yfir Rakel", surprisingly mature poems which nevertheless reflect some influence from his hero Byron - whose name is frequently mentioned in the diary. Gísli clearly tried to model his life as a student in Copenhagen on the ideal Romantic hero. Thus when he was not enthusing about literary or political matters, he was totally absorbed in great dreams, melancholy or self-doubt. Benedikt Gröndal's recollection of his student years in Copenhagen during the same period unfortunately do not have the spontaneity of his friend's diary. Written after the eighteen-seventies, his autobiography suggests that he was also attracted by popular Romantic notions. In fact Gröndal's work as a whole reflects this very clearly, in spite of his quizzical description of his youthful poetry as "gagndrepa af sorgartárum og eymdarskoðunum."[6]

Like Gísli, Gröndal read German Romantic literature while still at school, and began very early to write poetry himself. His early poetry reflects an influence from Jónas, but gradually it became less derivative. Although as a whole Gröndal's work reflects changes of mood and ideas, especially regarding politics, his ideas about poetry, man and nature were remarkably consistent. These are the subjects of an early article in Kvæði og nokkrar greinar (1853), which is very much a synthesis of

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6 Benedikt Gröndal, Dægradvöl (Reykjavík, 1965), p.132.

a wide variety of sources - including Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry". The article was undoubtedly the most coherent expression of Romanticism in Icelandic to date. Unlike Jónas Hallgrímsson, Gröndal was not a "Romantic scientist". In a period when the sciences and the humanities were developing in separate and increasingly specialised directions, Gröndal felt that the role of the poet was to seek essential truths about man. Such truths could be found only by studying the human soul in its natural context, i.e. the natural world. In contrast, he argued, the scientist is concerned with the logical dissection of isolated phenomena. Only his subject-matter i.e. nature, is in itself poetic, or divine:

> Guð hefur skapað heiminn eður náttúruna; þess vegna er hún fögur, því að grundvöllur hennar er hið rjetta og góða. Sama er að segja um manninn (eins og hann er óspilltur), guð gjörði hann eptir sinni mynd, og andi hans er fagur, og öll bygging hans. Það er þá sjálfsagt, að náttúran, sem er orð drottins, er skáldlegt; 7

This idea that any fundamental knowledge, both in relation to the material world and man's psychological make-up, derives from an interplay between the imagination and the external world, i.e. nature. Ten years later Gröndal had developed the idea in cornection with his interest in popular Nordic myths and beliefs. He argued that "Folket modtager Sagnet og föier adskilligt dertil, men det afrunder det ikke; Sagnets og Eventyrets förste Kilde ligger enten i Naturen eller i Aander, i Fantasien, eller

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7 Benedikt Gröndal, Kvæði og nokkrar greinar um skáldskap og fagrar menntir (Copenhagen, 1853), pp.68-69.

i begge paa engang." This led him towards a very Romantic notion of poetry and reality: "Fantasien er ogsaa Virkelighed; negtede vi det, saa nægtede vi med det samme al poetisk Sandhed."[8]

Gísli and Gröndal established a reputation as poets in the late forties. Gröndal's work became a major literary influence, whereas Gísli's popularity was somewhat transient - partly perhaps because of his open quarrel with Jón Sigurðsson. His poetry, especially "Grátur Jakobs yfir Rakel", made an immediate impact and influenced, among others, the farmer-poet Hjálmar Jónsson. Like Gröndal, Gísli was primarily interested in grand subject-matter, notably freedom, revolution and tragic love. He wrote little about landscape or nature, yet he was clearly influenced by Romantic ideas about man's relation to nature. The ideas put forward by the philosopher Steffens that the material world had no independent existence but was in part simply a manifestation of the spiritual world, are implicit in several of Gísli's poems.[9] When he left Copenhagen in 1847 to spend a summer in Iceland, Gísli wrote a farewell to Gröndal. In the poem the young man goes out of an evening in a calm and happy mood,

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8 Benedikt Gröndal "Folketro i Norden, Med særligt Hensyn til Island", Annaler for Oldkyndighed, 1863, p.7.

9 An introduction to Steffen's lectures of 1802 was published in Copenhagen in 1803 as Indledning til philosophiske forlæsninger. Gísli may not have read the work - neither Herder, Schelling nor Steffens are mentioned in his diary. Nevertheless Steffen's ideas were integrated into Danish notions of nature by the time Gísli came to Copenhagen in 1845.

anticipating his journey home. Gradually his senses become receptive to the changing aspect of his surroundings:

> Undarlega ómaði blær
> um aldin tré
> og dimmu blandin birta skær
> úr hafsins djúpu straumum sté.
>
> Ljómi og skuggar skiptust á
> í skýjum oft,
> sem fyrir augu blökkum brá
> og undan vindi liðu um lopt.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, pp.244-45)

Nature not only influences the poet's state of mind but it also mirrors his true feelings:

> Svo var og í sálu mér
> í súgi um kvöld -
> þar ljós og skuggar léku sér
> og tilfinninga flikrótt fjöld.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.245)

The feature which most clearly separates the ideas of nationality conveyed in the work of Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrímsson, from those of the later Romantics, is the latter's emphasis on individualism. Before the mid-century, most Icelandic poets elevated the common good, as they understood it, above the individual. In "Gunnarshólmi" it is absolutely essential to the plot of the poem that the hero does not act selfishly but sacrifices his life for future generations. The idea of society as an interdependent whole is even more central to poems such as "Alþing hið nýja". By contrast the later Romantics were equally concerned with the individual's potential for spiritual fulfilment especially in communication with nature. For Gröndal it was this characteristic which separated man from

the rest of the animal world:

> Veiztu það, að þinni djúpt í sál
> þúngir strengir furðuhljóma geyma?
> Og svo aðrir tala munar-mál,
> mærra heldr en gígju-rómar streyma.
>
> Veiztu það, að þessum röddum í
> þinn er guð, sem fegurð alla gefur?
>
> (Kvæðabók, pp.152-53)

Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's "Fossinn minn" is concerned with the same theme, the poet's own re-birth in wild nature:

> Hér einverunnar andinn ríkir blíður,
> Hann upp af þínu vötnum lyptir sér,
> Sú unaðsæld, sem yfir staðnum líður,
> Mig aftur hefur gefið sjálfur mér;
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.110)

All the later Romantics regard man as incomplete without solitary and spiritual communication with nature. Moreover human society is often shown to be a positive hindrance to the true understanding of life and the self. Man's escape from other human beings is absolutely central to Gröndal's notions of nature:

> Hví leitar þú í ljósum veizlu-sal
> að lífsins brunni, þar sem hann er fjær?
> hann er þar lángt í burt, í djúpum dal,
> þar dögg á smáum eyra-rósum hlær;
> þar fossin á við fjallagljúfrin tal
> og fjólum vaggar himinrunninn blær;
> þar máninn skín um miðja næturstund
> og mærum geisla slær á haf og grund.
>
> (Kvæðabók, p.2)

These ideas about nature bear little relation to Jónas's detailed descriptions of landscape which evoke nature in its wide variety. Gröndal's nature is metaphysical; it is something so complicated and important that it almost

eludes verbal expression. In his Kvæði og nokkrar greinar Gröndal echoes Shelley's dictum that "poetry is indeed something divine". Poetry, not science, reveals truth. But truth is elusive and is manifested to man indirectly through "hálfgagnsæja blæju, svo vjer finnum til þess eða skynjum það undir niðri" (p.69). These ideas were by no means original in 1853 and could have been derived from any one of a number of writers, notably Kierkegaard who wrote in his diary in 1837 that "Der maa dog gives Noget, der er saa saligt, at det ikke lader sig udsige med Ord - hvorfor blev ellers de Mænd, hvem noget ret Stort blev aabenbaret: Stumme"? [10] Once when he was disappointed with searching for knowledge in books, Gísli Brynjúlfsson expressed very similar sentiments:

> Mér leiðist hér að leita í gömlum blöðum,
> að ljósi því, sem eitt und himni býr.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.282)

After the mid-century, these notions about nature and its relation to man, gave a novel aspect to the Icelanders' ideas of nationality. The bond between the Icelander and his native land became involuntary. The image of the country as a mother was truly realised in Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's well known analogy: "Svo traust við Ísland mig tengja bönd,/ Ei trúrri binda son við móður" (Ljóðmæli, p.18). The most illuminating imagery to describe the individual's relation to the native land was taken from

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10 Den Romantiske Bevægelse, pp.21-22.

plants. Steingrímur used the word lífsrót to convey his belief that his life belonged to Iceland:

> Ljúft oss vort land er,
> því lífsrót vor er hér;
> Vor köllun, vor dáð
> Knýtt er fast við þetta láð
> Svo lengi vér lífsins anda drögum.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.12)

Unlike Steingrímur, Grímur Thomsen, possibly the least nationalistic poet after the mid-century, did not regard the bond with the motherland as a cause for celebration. He had few illusions about contemporary Icelandic society or its future. As an ardent admirer of Bjarni Thorarensen, he shared his strong view about the moral influence of the Northern landscape and climate. He felt that the modern Icelander was generally unworthy of his land and its history. Grímur is absolutely certain that his own spiritual health or development can only be fulfilled in his native land. When its roots are broken the plant will wither and die no matter how well it is tended:

> Í átthagana andinn leitar,
> þó ei sé loðið þar til beitar,
> og forsælu þar finnur hjartað,
> þó fátækt sé um skógarhögg.
> Sá er beztur sálargróður,
> sem að vex í skauti móður,
> en rótarslitinn visnar vísir,
> þó vökvist hlýrri morgun dögg.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, pp.2-3)

On returning home from a particularly pleasant stay in Britain and Scandinavia in the early seventies, Matthías felt that the first sight of Iceland was uninviting and fearsome. Again employing the imagery of roots, Matthías knows that he must return, for better or for worse:

Heim vil ég samt, því mín sál og mín rót
er samgróið landinu háa.
Ættbygð er sýnist nú úfin og ljót,
andi minn bræðir þinn jökul og grjót;

(Ljóðmæli, p.101)

Although the bond between the individual and the motherland is involuntary, human response to nature is essential. Here Matthías expresses sentiments which resemble Jónas Hallgrímsson's message in "Gunnarshólmi" in the emphasis on active love of country.

Stefán Einarsson aptly suggested that "the patriotic song of the nineteenth century (and after) more nearly took the place of the religious poetry of the age of orthodoxy."[11] Indeed after the mid-century the "Iceland-poem" became very like a secular hymn or a pseudo-religious nature poem. The religious beliefs of the Icelandic Romantics were in many respects highly unorthodox. Gröndal's work reflects a religious emphasis on the trinity of Man, Nature and God - probably in that order. Nature was often depicted as a temple where man worshipped the eternal mystery of life - "hina eilífu ráðgátu". God's presence is unobtrusive and manifested primarily in certain natural phenomena such as the sun, the moon and the sea. Sometimes Gröndal - and the other Romantics - expressed a very traditional response to God: a comet Gröndal observed in Germany in 1858, elicited a

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11 History of Icelandic Literature (New York, 1957), p.220.

simple and spontaneous response such as can be found in countless poems by Icelandic farmers:

> Ætlarðu kannski mig að minna
> máttlítinn bæði og gleyminn á,
> að guð sé til, sem gæti sinna,
> og góðum ætíð dvelji hjá?
>
> (Kvæðabók, pp.79-80)

Most Romantic poets associated God directly with nature - even at times specifically with Icelandic nature. Thus Gísli's homesickness was associated with the absence of God in the Danish landscape. Wild rugged nature was apparently regarded as more divine than flat arable land:

> Þars vötn ei helg af himinbjörgum falla,
> né heyrist guð í náttúrunni kalla.
> .....
> því heilög rödd í hamra gljúfrum dvelr
> og hljómr indæll sig í vötnum felr.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.282)

On the other hand most poets clearly felt that Icelandic nature had little to do with Christianity. In a period when the pre-Christian past was a golden age which provided practical and, more important, moral example to the present and a model for the future, paganism was of great significance. Some unschooled poets wrote elegies for dead friends who are depicted entering a heaven that clearly comes directly from the Edda. The pagan gods were often implicitly described as quasi-divine beings and a part of an essentially Icelandic religion of nature. In a topographical poem, "Fljótshlíð og Þórsmörk", Matthías Jochumsson, a clergyman and a hymnwriter, associates the land with paganism:

Engan fegri fjallablett,
fósturjörð mín, hef ég skoðað;
hér hafa goðin birt og boðað
alt þitt dýpsta eðli rétt

(Ljóðmæli, p.108)

The association of paganism and Icelandic nature was perhaps inevitable in view of the belief popularised by Jónas that the early settlers - most of whom were thought to be pagan - had contributed to the spirit of the country. Matthías clearly saw nothing wrong in emphasising the persistence of the spirit of the warlike god, Þór, in nature. Moreover, Matthías advises the person in mental distress, experiencing religious uncertainty to seek consolation in Þórsmörk - in spite of its dedication to paganism:

Son míns lands! ef sorg og neyð
sálu þína fer að beygja,
og þín trúar-dáð vill deyja -
inn á Þórsmörk legðu leið;
krjúptu hér við helgan meið,
himinlindir þessar drektu,
Guðdóms rúnir þessar þektu;
þá skaltu ekki kvíða deyð!

(Ljóðmæli, p.108)

But the final stanza shows that the main theme of the poem is a nationalistic war-cry, and presents a religious notion that is peculiarly Icelandic:

Vektu héðan þína þjóð
þrumu-styrkum guða rómi,
og með nýjum undurhljómi
syng vor fornu sólarljóð!

(Ljóðmæli, p.108)

Although it was not a novelty for Icelandic poetry to refer to the past, this tradition acquired a new meaning in

Romantic poetry. Past and present were sometimes depicted as one, always present in nature, which retains impressions of every human life for eternity. Thus Gröndal wrote not only "Fornöldin lifir altaf í / augnabliki sem kemur nýtt", but also "Náttúran er það eilíft band / allan sem tímann sameinar". In Romantic nationalism, the individual became an integral part of the native history from its beginning - which the Icelander believed he could identify almost to a day. Thus numerous poems stress the poets' obsession with being buried in the earth of the motherland. This is a theme in one of Gröndal's last "Iceland-poems":

> Hér var ég fæddur, og hér skal mitt lík
> hvíla í mold undir kistunnar brík,
> hér bjuggu faðir og móðir og mey,
> og mín er þessi jörð hvurt ég lifi eða dey.
>
> (Kvæðabók, pp.88-89)

The later Romantic poets adopted Jónas's concept of "natural culture"; Icelandic nature was "free" and therefore the Icelanders were inherently free people. It was accepted that freedom had been lost, but most poets considered this temporary. Paradoxically, this idea was sometimes presented side by side with Bjarni's contradictory concept of Icelandic nature as a chastising force; but few poets seem to have given serious thought to the inconsistency of these views. Steingrímur wrote "svo frjáls vertu móðir sem vindur á vog / sem vötn þín með straumunum þungu" and with unprecedented nonchalance he approached a subject that had been a terrible dilemma to

Bjarni:

Opt finnst oss vort land eins og helgrinda hjarn,
En hart er það aðeins sem móðir við barn,
Það agar oss strangt með sín ísköldu jél,
En á samt til blíðu, það meinar allt vel.

(Ljóðmæli, p.116)

CHAPTER 5

Love of Country

Before the end of the nineteenth century, Icelandic poetry had developed a distinct nationalistic idiom particularly conspicuous in the patriotic ættjarðarljóð, notably the "Iceland-poem". The genre evolved its character and prominence in the works of the Danish educated poets, from Bjarni Thorarensen onwards, which gave the language of nationalism an incisively foreign framework of ideas and a degree of sophistication in form and content rarely present in the traditional poetry. Paradoxical though it may seem to later generations reared on its notion of a people united in aims and spirit, the Romantic ættjarðarljóð was initially alien to the Icelanders. Written by a small literary élite, its idiom and style often contradicted popular feelings about Icelandic society and nature. In the beginning of the period 1830-74 educated and unschooled poets differed in their ideas of nationality. During the course of the century, however, these differences became less transparent as a growing number of unschooled poets began to write ættjarðarljóð, not simply to portray Icelandic

nature in her glory but also to express loyalty and devotion to the motherland: sentiments transcending political convictions and social distinctions. In this poetry they showed an obvious desire to master and assimilate the nationalistic idiom of their acknowledged superiors in the art of poetry. Nevertheless, traditional attitudes to nature and ideas of nationality persisted, albeit less apparent in a form that had evolved to accommodate new ways of thinking and literary expression.

There is evidence to suggest that by the last quarter of the century, many people considered it unpatriotic to be critical of the climate or landscape of Iceland. In 1888 Matthías Jochumsson, then a pastor in Akureyri, wrote a poem that was probably inspired by the unusually bitter conditions in the North of Iceland during the eighties. Though he later claimed that the poem had not been intended for publication, Matthías sent it to an acquaintance who happened to be the editor of Lögberg, an expatriate Icelandic publication in Canada. He included the poem in the July issue of the periodical and two months later it appeared in Iceland in the paper Ísafold. Contradicting the canon of nationalistic poetry, which he himself had helped to forge during the previous decades, Matthías derided the country for failing to provide a decent livelihood for its people:

Volaða land,
horsælu hérvistar slóðir,
húsgangsins trúfasta móðir
volaða land:

Hafísa land,
ískrandi illviðrum marið,
eilífum hörmungum barið,
hafísa land:

(Ljóðmæli, p.83)

The response to the poem was general disapproval, even outrage. Clearly a þjóðskáld was not expected to express such disrespect for the motherland. Matthías immediately retracted in two lengthy poems, confirming his patriotism:

Þeir segja ég hafi hrópað fár
og heift yfir þínar slóðir, -
en brenni mín sál um eilíf ár,
ef ann ég þér ekki, móðir.

(Ljóðmæli, p.84)

Although Matthías's recantation betrays quiet amusement, he clearly took the episode seriously. While he was a man of volatile and sensitive temperament, as is reflected in the passion and inconsistency of his work, he usually valued the opinions of his readers.

Writing nationalistic poetry became something of an epidemic in 1874, the millennium of the Settlement of Iceland. Poetry was an important feature of the celebrations: Matthías wrote numerous poems for the official functions in Reykjavík, and local poets praised the motherland in verses that were sung or recited at the various gatherings around the country. In Copenhagen, Benedikt Gröndal and Gísli Brynjúlfsson added colour to

the festivities of Icelandic students, expatriates and their guests. Others still found a more limited audience in friends, family and neighbours. Many of the 1874 poems - now mostly forgotten - were a glorification of Icelandic nature through imagery and symbolism that confirmed the widespread influence of the "new" style. Few poets employed the traditional quatrain, preferring ancient Icelandic or foreign metres popularised by the þjóðskáld. With few exceptions, unschooled poets and older clergymen were more at ease with the terse and structured form of the rímur. The subject-matter and the occasion, however, clearly demanded a grand style distinct from everyday versemaking for entertainment.

Nationalistic poetry written in 1874 demonstrates that poets of different backgrounds had already been strongly influenced by Romantic notions about nature, a development that became increasingly apparent after the mid-century. For example, prior to Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Fjallið Skjaldbreiður" (1841), poems about volcanic eruptions usually expressed fear or superstition. The farmer, Runólfur Sigurðsson (1798-1862) was not moved by magnificence or beauty when he witnessed the eruption of Katla in 1823. He described the event with a degree of accuracy which conveys some of the dramatic qualities of an eruption in spite of his undistinguished everyday imagery. The emphasis of the poem, however, lies very firmly on the destruction wrought in the farming

community and on the divine warning that people often construed from such catastrophes:

> En þó allmjög sviði
> eftir slíka vendi
> hirting fyrst er hjá,
> gráta hvorki gagnar, ber né kvíða
> glaður hver hið bága skyldi líða,
> allra vonin er til sælli tíða
> en jafnlyndi skal oss dáðum prýða.
>
> (Lbs. 1309, 4to.)

By contrast a poem written by Jón Bjarnason (1823-1905) about the eruption of Hekla in 1845, is clearly influenced by Jónas. The focus is on the event itself; its power and violence are admired irrespective of its dreadful consequences:

> Fjöll með dunum frægum hrynja
> fæðast önnur báls af hrönnum,
> jöklar sprýnga sporin þungu
> sparka stundum foldu í sundur.
>
> (Lbs. 2703, 8vo.)

By 1860 Jón is following the growing fashion of personifying great mountains. The volcano Katla is given human attributes popularly associated with certain figures in the Sagas, men such as Egill Skallagrímsson and Skarphéðinn Njálsson, and women like Hallgerður in Njáls saga and Þorgerður in Laxdæla. Pride, austerity, stoicism and passion gave nature the qualities of favourite historical and literary characters who were seen as unique and truly Icelandic:

> Fanna skauta faldi háum
> forn í skapi nístir grund,
> horfir æ að bárum bláum
> brimið gleður kalda lund.
> Um hana kveður hljóðskær Ægir
> harðfengur við Mýrdalssand,

þar sem aldrei vogur vægir
en veður sífellt uppá land.

(Lbs. 2703, 8vo.)

The poem was written after Jón graduated from the grammar school and the theological college in 1852. Its theme and sentiments, and the quotation from "Fjallið Skjaldbreiður" reflect not only the growing influence of Jónas's poetry, but also a new kind of attitude to nature.

Unschooled poets were generally eclectic in their perception of the "new" style of nature poetry. Their "Iceland-poems" therefore often included new stylistic features that were at odds with the persistence of traditional attitudes to the country in the bulk of their work. This is demonstrated by the discord often found in such poetry. Jónas Guðmundsson (1832-98), a blacksmith and a small-scale farmer, exemplifies this ambivalence in two poems he wrote in celebration of 1874, where he speaks of volcanic eruptions and the barrenness of the country. Nature is seen as the source of man's survival, yet it is also God's instrument to punish the nation collectively and to remind man of his imperfection and dependence on the Providence:

Vjer höfum brotið mikið og margt
móti þjer Guð alvís,
þessvegna stundum þolað hart
og þúngt ströffunar hrís;
stórsóttir, eldur, ís
ógnuðu tíðum okkar þjóð fámennu.

(Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

On the other hand the impact of the "new" style on his

poetry is easily adduced from a poem written on New Year's Eve in the same year. Iceland is portrayed in a glory of fire, ice and towering mountains:

> Heill sje þjer kæra fjallafrón
> með fanna skör og bjarta fossa,
> þar sem jarðeldar yfir blossa;
> tignarlegri ei sjá má sjón.
> Þar sem norður ljósin loga
> lýsandi háan jökul boga,
> heiðríkt af stjörnum ljómar lopt.
>
> (Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

Here ice and fire are admired simply for their intrinsic visual quality - "tignarlegri ei sjá má sjón". The poet is no longer concerned with nature in a wide sense but with the motherland, addressed with affection and veneration, a tone characteristic of the þjóðskáld.

None of the unschooled poets thoroughly assimilated the underlying philosophy of the Romantic attitude to nature; and the older poets in particular continued to ignore the new fashion of describing nature at length. The generation born after 1820, however, often instinctively grasped the significance that writers such as Benedikt Gröndal attached to man's need to understand nature's or Iceland's quintessential spirituality. The older generation were rarely successful in emulating their Danish educated compatriots and some of their efforts appear stilted and self-conscious. When the farmer-poet Sigurður Lynge celebrated the National Convention in 1851, he portrayed Þingvellir as a sacred place with an important role in the country's past and

future. It is possible that the idea derived from Jónas, who used Þingvellir in several poems as a symbol of national freedom. Like many unschooled poets, however, Sigurður did not have an abstract and metaphysical view of nationality. He clearly saw a promise of material progress as the main attraction of nationalism. The vision he projected of Þingvellir in the future therefore necessarily emphasised materialism - man-made edifices brazenly associated with wealth and prosperity. Only the descriptive word gló-fagur is reminiscent of Jónas:

hér mun hús reist
á hellu-bjargi
gulli og demant
gló-fögrum skreytt:

(Lbs. 1780, 4to.)

Moreover by the mid-century only a few unschooled poets were in tune with the post-Romantic distaste for comparing nature to artificial things. But, like most poets of his background, Sigurður was still at home with poetry drawing its imagery of nature from the bejewelled symbolism of the Bible - the Revelations of St. John in particular - reinforced by perhaps Milton's Paradise Lost recently published in Icelandic. Imagery that used precious stones and metals came easily to the rímur poet whose stock in trade was adventure and courtly romances. The earthly riches described in the poem contradict the nationalistic idiom Sigurður was trying to emulate. To Jónas, Þingvellir symbolised purely spiritual aspects of nationality - something akin to the German idea of a

national soul. This attitude to the native landscape was the main reason for the passions aroused by the debate on whether to re-establish the Alþing in its "natural" surroundings or whether to make it a centre of a new commercial and administrative capital, the dream of Jón Sigurðsson. The Danish-educated poets often implied that there was danger in an unchecked economic progress. They argued that when material advance had been achieved, which few poets seriously doubted, the nation must remember that nationality is a spiritual state of mind.

The poetry written in the period 1830-74 reflects a generational as well as educational disparity. Scholarly clergymen such as Jón Jónsson (lærði), who outlived Fjölnir by a year, continued to write poetry about nature which reflected Enlightened ideas. Most of his generation rarely wrote about nature, apart from the day-to-day problems of the seasons, and usually saw the vagaries of the climate as an instrument for divine punishment for human sinfulness. Even Jón Þorláksson, possibly the most accomplished poet in Iceland at the time, wrote hardly any serious poetry about nature, except for his translations from Tullin. With the publication of Eggert Ólafsson's Kvæði in 1832, didactic and informative nature poetry was given a new, if short-lived lease of life. Yet, although Eggert's book was apparently a treasured possession in many homes, his poetry made only a limited impact on younger poets, especially those who had formal education.

Moreover the influence of a growing nationalistic sentiment and new ideas of democracy modified the notions of hierarchy propounded by Eggert.

Hjálmar Jónsson, one of Iceland's most original unschooled poets, is seen by most literary historians as having had one foot firmly planted in the eighteenth century. More recently attention has been drawn to the parallels between his attitude to society and that of the social realism of the late nineteenth-century.[1] Others have seen his poetry as uniquely personal, understandable "only in the light of his experiences".[2] All these comments possess a grain of truth. Hjálmar wrote a few poems that were clearly influenced by Eggert Ólafsson, whose work he obviously admired. His first poem was not printed until after he reached the age of sixty - despite the fact that the growing periodical literature often carried works by unschooled poets. The poem, written to launch a new agricultural society in his native sýsla, appropriately appeared in Húnvetningur in 1857. Here Hjálmar adopted a tone that was typical of the learned clergyman-farmer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century:

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1 Straumar og stefnur, p.92.

2 Richard Beck, History of Icelandic poets 1800-1940, Islandica, XXXIV (Ithaca, 1950), 66.

Örvum svarðvöxt
aldinnar móður,
smyrjum kalin kaun;
undir hárlokkum er afl hennar fólgið,
en brauð vort og bjargálnir.

(Ritsafn, I, 10)

In this and a few other poems, Hjálmar emphasised the practical aspects of reclaiming the now degraded and neglected motherland. The imagery and the choice of words highlight the stress on utility - svarðvöxt, smyrjum, brauð, bjargálnir. Hjálmar usually sees the land in terms of farming and the simple necessity to survive. Sometimes his feelings for the land were that of the religious farmer who for generations had seen hard work as a justification of God's gift to man. Characteristically he rarely adopted a didactic tone which is in contrast to others who emulated Búnaðarbálkur.

Hjálmar's contribution to the millennial celebration has been seen with some justification as expressing an attitude exceptional among the tributes paid to Iceland in 1874. The poem he wrote for the occasion was characteristically out of tune with the sentiments expressed in most "Iceland-poems", in making a mockery of the Romantic vision of the country:

Sjá nú, hvað eg er beinaber,
brjóstin visin og fölar kinnar,
eldsteyptu lýsa hraunin hér
hörðum búsifjum æfi minnar;
kóróna mín er kaldur snjár,
klömbrur hafísa mitt aðsetur,
þrautir mínar í þúsund ár
þekkir guð einn og talið getur.

(Ritsafn, I, 15)

Although this Iceland-image bears strong resemblance to Eggert Ólafsson's "Ísland", it is stylistically similar to the typical "Iceland-poem". Hjálmar employs the familiar juxtaposition of fire and ice, used more than half a century earlier by Bjarni Thorarensen. Instead of highlighting the country's magnificence or fearful dignity, these qualities show the pathos of a decrepit and worn-out old woman. Were the poem not an exceptionally sincere work which reflects Hjálmar's concern with people rather than an abstract notion of nature, it could be regarded as a caricature of the Romantic "Iceland-poem".

Hjálmar's unease with an abstract, timeless and an aesthetic image of the country, that by its very nature ignored the social conditions and the unequal distribution of wealth and status, was perhaps shared by the majority of unschooled poets of the period. An example of this is found in the poetry of Júlíana Jónsdóttir (1837-1918). A spinster with no private means, Júlíana was the first Icelandic woman to see a book of her poetry published. She was one of many poets of poor background to voice despair at the social conditions, the native climate and the unfruitfulness of the land. Hjálmar's stark image of "kalin kaun" is echoed in her poetry:

> Elgamla Ísafold,
> ófrjósöm er þín mold,
> blásin og ber;
> næðir af norðan vind
> nágola um snjófgan tind;
>
> (Stúlka, p.8)

Júliana adapts Bjarni Thorarensen's popular "Íslands minni" to portray a barren and infertile soil. The word nágola highlights windswept scenery and the apparent failure of the land to provide nourishment for life. It is significant that this deadly breeze comes from the North, which to Bjarni provided the Icelanders with strength to survive in a harsh nature.

Like Hjálmar, Júlíana made a mockery of the "Iceland-poem". She also celebrated 1874 in a mood of defiance, without deference to her literary and social superiors. Her Iceland is portrayed as a woman who can no longer nurture her infants. Like many unschooled poets she employs the earthy image of breasts, that in her poem are sucked dry of milk. Júlíana's stark imagery is an accusation of an élite, hundar, who have destroyed the people's sustenance, and draw the life-blood from the motherland:

> Líttu á þinna niðja nauð;
> nákvæmara þetta grunda;
> kaldra þinna krakka brauð
> kastast lát ei fyrir hunda,
> svo blóðsognum af brjóstum þínum
> burt ei hrökkvi í armóð sínum.
>
> (Stúlka, p.5)

Though Júlíana's poetry is clearly marked by her social and economic background, her notion of nationality depended on a belief that a mystical bond tied the individual to his native land. When she was leaving for America, Júlíana wrote hymns to the country she wanted to

escape from in order to find economic and personal independence. At this point she reflects the Romantic notion that the bond with the motherland superseded economic needs: an idea clearly derived from the many poems written by expatriates and students in Denmark expressing their longing to return home:

> ef hann, þér farinn frá,
> framandi er þjóðum hjá,
> harmandi af hjarta þá
> heim óskar sér.
>
> (Stúlka, p.9)

Written by someone who had never left the country, the poem demonstrates the impact of the Danish-educated poets on their contemporaries who had no experience of "exile". It is also paradoxical in that Júlíana's poetry suggests that poverty was one reason why she emigrated.

On the whole, Hjálmar's generation had a different attitude to society. Their notions of patriotism was coloured by their habitual acceptance of hierarchy. In times of hardship they naturally petitioned the king or their God. Hjálmar always showed the former due respect; but in spite of his particularly moving religious faith, his temper would rise against the Almighty in a desperate cry for assistance to his compatriots. Celebrating the National Convention in 1851, his plea to God turned into an open threat:

Legg við, faðir, líknareyra,
leið oss einhvern hjálparstig;
en viljirðu ekki orð mín heyra,
eilíf náðin guðdómlig,
mitt skal hróp af heitum dreyra
himininn rjúfa kringum þig.

(Ritsafn, I, 5)

By contrast, Hjálmar's younger contemporary, Páll Ólafsson, can be cited as an example of the unschooled poet's new interest in nature. His convivial and popular lyrics about spring and summer, notably "Ó blessuð vertu sumarsól", and his stanzas about his horses, his second wife and their children show a pleasant view of the world. In form and language, Páll was clearly influenced by the "new" style from an early age. His father, the poet and pastor Ólafur Indriðason (1796-1861) was a great admirer of Fjölnir which carried some of his writing. This background may have contributed to Páll's sensitivity to literature and his reluctance to adopt new forms and ideas indiscriminately. Thus he wrote no "learned" poetry or any of the lengthy "Iceland-poems" which so often led unschooled poets into tedious narrative and irrelevant digressions.

Páll did in fact write two poems specifically for the celebrations in 1874. That written for the festivities in Hallormsstaðaskógur adopts the metre and style of Jónas's "Dalvísa". Its light and deceptively easy rhythm was eminently suited for the occasion and the pleasant tune to which it was set had probably acquired connotations with national sentiments. But true to his general

attitude to poetry, Páll was unable to adopt the idiom of nationalism wholeheartedly, or to enter into the spirit of the occasion by emulating the imagery of his educated counterparts. Unlike his most successful and more spontaneous nature poems, the result is apparently self-conscious:

> Nú er Ísafoldin frjáls.
> Fjöll og dalir vötn og skógar,
> Allt tekur nú eins til máls;
> 'Ógn er gott að vera frjáls'.
> Fellur eitt um annars háls
> af unaði til lands og sjóar,
> því nú er Ísafoldin frjáls,
> fjöll og dalir, vötn og skógar.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, pp.205-6)

The poem reflects Páll's consistent claim, which contradicts the quality of many of his verses, that he was only a simple poet. Thus he tries to achieve a colloquial tone by using mundane phrases, such as "ógn er gott" and "fellur eitt um annars háls", which militates against the elevated sentiment of the subject-matter. The notion of mountains, valleys and lakes falling into an embrace is simply too extraordinary and makes the occasion - "Eftir þungan þrældómsblund / þjóð er runninn frelsisdagur" - peculiar rather than moving or glorious.

Whereas the Danish-educated þjóðskáld tended to convey an idea of nature and its relation to man, Páll was at his best when writing about immediate personal responses to the seasons or the landscape. Thus he welcomes the first promise of spring with infectious

spontaneity. His address to a prolonged and harsh winter endangering his livestock is equally direct:

> Með öllum þínum fjandafans
> farðu að moka snjóinn
> annaðhvort til andskotans
> eða þá í sjóinn.

(Ljóðmæli, p.170)

This is admittedly not among Páll's best work, but shows very forcefully his acute awareness of the difference between the ideal vision of Iceland and reality. His obvious temptations to follow the ideal presented by the Romantics was usually tempered by his intimate knowledge of living in a harsh and precarious climate. He could, however, match Jónas Hallgrímsson in his colourful visual images:

> Nú eru á himnum norðurljós
> niður að fjallatindum.
> Loftið er allt ein logarós,
> sem leikur í ótal myndum.
>
> Hvítum jökulfjöllum frá
> funahríslur renna.
> Það er furðufrítt að sjá
> fjöll og himin brenna.

(Ljóðmæli, p.40)

But he was never carried away for long by such sentiments; in the same poem the beauty of winter must be qualified and, almost self-consciously, justified by reality:

> og ég get naumast neitað því,
> að nú er fagurt veður.

(Ljóðmæli, p.40)

Sigurður Breiðfjörð was the only unschooled poet who contributed markedly to the imagery of nature in

nationalistic poetry. During his apprenticeship in Copenhagen, Breiðfjörð became interested in recent Scandinavian poetry, especially popular lyrics. He was particularly enamoured of the Danish pre-Romantic Jens Baggesen - whose name he gave to two sons. This early contact with nature poetry gave his work scope and flexibility, reflected even in his use of the strict form of the rímur. The light touch of some of his stanzas distinguished him from the majority of unschooled poets of his generation. Breiðfjörð's poetry presents a consistent attitude to society, but he propounded no theories. Unlike his educated colleagues, he wrote no "Iceland-poems" - his patriotic "Við endursjón Íslands" and "Fjöllin á fróni" being loosely translated or adapted from Scandinavian poems. Breiðfjörð's poetry appears to be spontaneous and much of it, especially the rímur, was written exclusively to entertain. Although he clearly drew some inspiration from Eggert Ólafsson, especially his admiration for the God-given order in nature, Breiðfjörð's emphasis was always on the delight rather than on the lesson man derives from this arrangement. In "Veturinn", winter is seen as a time of calm rest for nature after the hectic activity of spring and summer:

> Ísinn breiðist yfir lá
> undir heiði bláu,
> geymir neyð og frosti frá
> fiska seyðin smáu.
>
> (Ljóðasafn, I, 30)

In "Haustið", on the other hand, he captures the farmer's traditional unease with a coming winter and the habitual dependence and appeal to Providence:

> Jurta móðir litarlaus
> í líkblæjunum sefur.
> Mjólk og blóð í brjóstum fraus,
> sem börnin vökvað hefur.
> .....
> Lát, ó, faðir lífsins, þá
> líknar smyrsli drjúpa
> vonhungraða öndu á
> í eymda kafinu djúpa.
>
> (Ljóðasafn, I, 34-35)

Breiðfjörð's contribution to Icelandic nature poetry lies primarily in the imagery which has made some of his quatrains a popular part of the nation's poetic vocabulary. His best known stanzas such as,

> Sólin klár á hveli heiða
> hvarma gljár við baugunum.
> Á sér hár hún er að greiða
> upp úr bárulaugunum.
>
> (Ljóðasafn, I, 39)

combine traditional rhyme and poetic language with an aesthetic appreciation of nature that is quite new in such poetry. Benedikt Gröndal, always ready to defy conventional attitudes, had the presumption to suggest that Jónas Hallgrímsson's much admired "Þú stóðst á Heklu tindi hám" was influenced by Breiðfjörð's "Fjöllin á fróni", published in Ljóðasmámunir two years earlier.[3]

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3 Dægradvöl, p.41.

Whether this was the case or not is difficult to ascertain - particularly as the poem is a very loose translation of "Hvor herligt er mit Fødeland" by the Norwegian, S.O.Wolff. Nevertheless, the similarities in the works of these very different poets are rather remarkable. Jónas´s poetry represents new and foreign currents which became the foundation of a nationalistic idiom and an intrinsic part of the canon of Icelandic literature. Breiðfjörð, on the other hand, represents above all a continuation of popular poetic traditions which his experiences abroad reinforced and gave new impetus. The fundamental difference in their style of writing cannot hide the parallels in their attitude to nature and ways of describing landscapes. Both captured the strong light and peculiar colour effects often found in Iceland. Jónas´s greater sophistication as a poet is unmistakable, but like Breiðfjörð he used imagery which captured the Icelandic landscape at its very best. This poetry incorporates brilliant visual images: the reflection of the sun on water and mountains and stark colours contrasting with green vegetation. Both poets wrote about wild animals. Breiðfjörð´s "Móðuræðurinn" - included in his Ljóðasmámunir (1836) - expresses a feeling for wildlife identical to Jónas´s sentiments in "Heiðlóarkvæði", printed in Fjölnir in the same year. In spite of their disagreement over the art of poetry, both conveyed an immediate response to the joyful aspects of nature. This gave a new dimension to Icelandic poetry by emphasising the beauty and pleasure to be found in people´s

familiar surroundings. Moreover, they tended to observe nature at a distance, without intense personal involvement or the farmer's private concern with his livelihood.

Although Breiðfjörð wrote no "Iceland-poems", he developed an image of the country that occurs frequently in his poetry, including the rímur. He usually personifies Iceland as a mother figure, rather than the more dignified fjallkona. His work demonstrates how a sensitive unschooled poet could write in the spirit of the literary renaissance, without plagiarising the Danish-educated poets. In his poetry about nature Breiðfjörð often employed homely similes and imagery arising naturally from everyday experiences thus responding to the tastes of his readers. In the hands of the mediocre poet this approach was often less than rewarding, but at its best it represented a modification of the ættjarðarljóð which established an imaginative poetic style culminating in the poetry of Þorsteinn Erlingsson. In Núma rímur Breiðfjörð deals with his longing for the homeland during his stay in Greenland:

> Um þína prýði að þenkja og tala
> það er tíðast gleðin mín;
> í högum fríðu hlýrra dala
> hjörð um skríður brjóstin þín.[4]

The fruitfulness of the land is highlighted by a flock of sheep nurtured by the warm breasts of the motherland. This kind of idealised vision of the valley was to become a

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4 Sigurður Breiðfjörð, Núma rímur, ed. Sveinbjörn Sigurjónsson (Reykjavík, 1937), p.38.

familiar fixture in the poetry of the next generation of unschooled poets. It supplanted Eggert Ólafsson's moral and ordered sæludalur and even influenced the later Romantics' notions of beauty. The popularity of this type of imagery demonstrates Breiðfjörð's power to stir the imagination of his compatriots, ordinary people in particular. But to the more refined tastes, the homely, almost pastoral image must have seemed quaint and uncouth. The idea of Iceland as lush and fecund is not generally associated with Romantic nature poetry. It is nevertheless found in the works of educated poets such as Steingrímur Thorsteinsson. His sæludalur, however, tends to be that of the traveller looking on a happy and industrious rural community:

> Vér fórum með bygðum þar fólk var við slátt,
> Og felt lá þar kafgras í slægjum;
> Um fjallbrekkur hópaðist kvíaféð kátt,
> Í kvöldlogni þryluðust bláreykir hátt,
> Og bjarkilminn lagði frá bæjum;
> Og hinzta lék sólbros á sveitalífs ró,
> Er sjónina þýðlega dvaldi,
> En áfram var haldið, því eftir var nóg,
> Unz aptur oss skógurinn faldi.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.81)

This is Steingrímur on one of his "rural rides" in the eighties, but similar sentiments are common also in his early poetry such as "Sveitasæla", printed in Ný félagsrit in 1856:

> Bændabýlin þekku
> Bjóða vina til
> Hátt und hlíðarbrekku
> Hvít með stofu þil.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.59)

Steingrímur's detachment from the life behind this lovely picture is emphasised by a comparison with Páll Ólafsson's graphic and more realistic portrayal of the nineteenth-century farmhouse:

> Fyrst mig leggja fjötur á
> fúnir moldarkofar,
> hvað er ég að hvarfla þá
> himinstjörnum ofar.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.41)

The Danish-educated poets had no particular interest in an agrarian or a pastoral ideal of Iceland. Many unschooled poets, on the other hand, often included such visions of the country in their "Iceland-poems". Thus Símon Bjarnarson, for many years a shepherd, commemorated 1874 by a combination of the fire and ice image - "þrungin eldi, þakin sköflum" and "földuð hvítum fanna tröfum" - and a homely pastoral ideal. Here the Golden Age is remarkable not only for its heroism, freedom and the beauty of the land, but also because the farming was good:

> Og þá hjarðir eygðust nógar
> iðgrænt fram um haga svið,
> þykkir víða skinu skógar
> skærum hvarmaljósum við.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.114)

This portrayal of a green valley swarming with livestock, and the idea of the settler as a contented farmer was presented in Breiðfjörð's popular Núma rímur:

Feður vorir völdu sér
vist í dala skjóli græna;
sinnar gætti hjarðar hver
og happa rækti búið væna.

Aldinfeita akra flöt
öldungana gömlu fæddi;
þá í heit og hreinleg föt
hjörð af sínum skrúða klæddi.[5]

Presenting the forefathers as ageing farmers clad in warm and clean woollens from their well tended sheep was quite unusual. But, because of Breiðfjörð's influence, the idea of the forefathers as hard working and prosperous farmers occurs side by side with the familiar myth about the heroic vikings and the wise lawmakers.

As nationalistic sentiments became an increasingly important feature in poetry, the unschooled poets gradually began to associate nationalism with love of country. This is reflected in various types of poetry, for example the topographical poem. Breiðfjörð's work was an important, if perhaps indirect influence in stimulating poems conveying local patriotism, both through his nature poetry as a whole and in his poems about his birthplace, Breiðifjörður. In one of these poems he praised the island Flatey, its beauty, the excellence of its commerce, its culture and the people:

Umgyrðir unnur blá
eyjuna fögru þá
eins allt um kring.
.....

---

5 Núma rímur, p.86.

Hafskip við húsin stá
harðvelli sléttum á
við marar mey,
földuð með reiða og rá
ríkmannlegt er að sjá,

(Ljóðmæli, III, 67)

Poets who left the district of their childhood, either permanently or for short periods, expressed emotions very similar to that of the "exiled" students thinking about home. Even poets who wrote little or no nature poetry were affected by local patriotism. Like many farmer's sons, Sigurður Bjarnason (1841-65), who hailed from Katadalur in the North of Iceland, was sent to Akranes for the winter-fishing at an early age. Every year he marked the end of the season and his return home with a poem. On his way home in 1864, Sigurður wrote a characteristic record of his return:

Ár nítjánda öldin þar
um sextíu fjóra bar;
nálægt miðjum maí var -
minnisljóð eg smíða -
hvítasunnuhátíð á
Holtavörðufjöll eg sá
hulin þoku og hvítum snjá,
heim þá vermenn ríða.

(Ljóðmæli, p.109)

Although he greatly admired the "new" style and wrote a poem to praise Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's translation of Axel by Tégner, Sigurður remained a consistently traditional poet. For someone born as late as 1841, he was unusual in his absolutely rigid adherence to familiar Icelandic metres and his avoidance of imitation of recent stylistic changes in poetry. His local patriotism

conveyed a sense of a joyful escape from the uncertain and uncomfortable existence of the fishermen:

> Germju-forða framdráttinn
> flýja þorði vandi
> hug því skorðað hef ég minn
> heima á Norðurlandi.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.24)

The fact that many unschooled poets travelled quite extensively within Iceland undoubtedly played a part in the many poems expressing local patriotism. The poet, Símon Bjarnarson was in many ways very typical in his sentiments about his home valley. His poems about Skagafjörður demonstrate the influence of Breiðfjörð's imagery of nature:

> Loks sé ég minna dala djúp;
> dreifast lækir um brekkur niður,
> glitra túnin í grænum hjúp,
> glymjandi heyrist fugla kliður.
> Grösug og falleg glóir jörð,
> ganga fer undir hlýja sólin,
> smalinn kallar og hóar hjörð,
> heim sem rennur á kvíabólin.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.103)

The unschooled poet was often at his best depicting Iceland on a calm summer evening, and such poems became a strong feature of local patriotism. Nevertheless, many poets wrote about homesickness where the distant valley became a utopia where sadness or discomfort were absent. This notion of the sæludalur was quite alien to earlier poets, even Breiðfjörð in spite of his many poems about Breiðifjörður. By contrast Símon wrote about his home valley as a haven where he would find repose from life's difficulties:

Ljót mig baga leiðindin -
ljóða klagar gjörðin;
hryggur slagar hugurinn
heim í Skagafjörðinn.

(Ljóðmæli, p.168)

Conversely, unschooled poets tried to denigrate a place where they had been offended or mistreated or had found the inhabitants uncultured. Hjálmar Jónsson is well known for this type of poetry which perhaps contributed to the many anecdotes about his eccentricity. At times his description of a particular place was a general statement about the social conditions in Iceland. One such poem paints a rather stark picture of the poor family after a long winter, demonstrating Hjálmar's concern with people rather than landscape:

Harklegt er við Hólmafjörð,
hulin sá eg jökli skörð,
fisklaust vatn og föla jörð,
fúla menn og svanga;
dárar margir drukku vín,
dreifðu þar með raunum sín,
en börn og konan heima hrín,
horaða bleyta vánga.

(Ljóðmæli, p.422)

Like the "exiled" student comparing Iceland favourably with Denmark, the poet away from home somtimes contrasted his present abode - particularly if this happened to be Reykjavík - with his own part of the country. The birthplace is then seen as more beautiful and usually inhabited by people of superior morality and culture. Thus while in the capital, Jón Mýrdal (1835-99) often expressed a strong desire to return to his birthplace

which he left as a young man. Like so many Icelandic poets he depicts Reykjavík as a den of iniquity:

> Þrái ég kæra Mýrdal minn,
> mig hans langar aptur vitja;
> harla litla hjer ég finn
> heillavon, þar margflókinn,
> illur vani og ósóminn
> á annari hvorri þúfu sitja.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.47)

Some poets even began to contrast North and South in Iceland in the same way as the educated poets did in a global context. Brynjúlfur Oddsson, a bookbinder who spent several years in Ísafjörður in the North-west, clearly felt that the harsh climate in the district influenced the character of the inhabitants:

> Oss heimsækir hríð og frost,
> hug og kjark sem gefur
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.77)

Topographical poetry, particularly fashionable among unschooled poets, was usually a description of the home district but might also be a place encountered on a journey. The genre is related to the traditional bæjarvísur or hreppavísur which enumerated every farm in a particular hreppur, naming the farmer and his spouse, and commenting on their characters and ability as farmers - usually in a polite manner. In Greenland, Breiðfjörð wrote a new version of this genre. Imagining himself on a hillock on an island in his beloved Breiðifjörður, he looks over the myriad of islands in the bay and towards the distant countryside:

Eg stend í Hrappsey Álfhól á
og eyjar horfi fram um háar,
úr himinspeglinum hvíta sjávar,
hreinar og þvegnar, gyltar, bláar,

(Ljóðasafn, I, 89)

After describing the scene, Breiðfjörð recollects the farms where his friends and relatives live. In contrast the bæjarvísur paid no attention to landscape. Topographical poetry was often no more than a pure scenic description, usually concentrating on a particular district as if viewed from a hill-top. Páll Ólafsson wrote several such poems; and like Breiðfjörð he chose to view the scenery from above:

Fjöllin upp úr óðu
o´n í miðja hlíð,
sveipuð sumarmóðu,
sveitin mín var fríð.
Þokan svöl og silfurgrá
lagðist yfir lagardjúp,
lengra en augað sá.

(Ljóðmæli, p.187)

The tone of the poem is typical of similar descriptive works where thematic structure is usually weak or absent. Their most sriking aspect is an emotive expression of love of country through a description of landscape. On the whole the imagery of these poems owes more to Breiðfjörð than to the Danish-educated poets, but often the nationalistic idiom of the latter merged with the more traditional mode of writing. At its most extreme, the feeling for the country, its beauty or spiritual significance, quite overwhelms the poet. Thus the pastor Hallgrímur Jónsson (1811-80) described Mývatnssveit where

he had spent his childhood, with an intensity matching the most intoxicated "Iceland-poems":

> Þegar eg sje þig sveitin fríða
> og sje þig breiða faðminn výða
> utanum blessuð börnin þín,
> þegar eg eygi þessar hlýðar,
> þennann leikvöll æskutýðar,
> þá er sem málið missi sín.
>
> (Lbs. 2140, 4to.)

After the mid-century, most poetry about nature was written with an awareness of the nationalistic idiom of the Danish-educated poets. Even those who were generally traditional and clearly suspicious of change and new-fangled ideas in literature tended to use imagery from the "new" style. Poets became less interested in narrative themes and gradually adopted less archaic language. Although many of these poets clearly felt pessimistic about achieving economic prosperity in their country, this had no apparent effect on their love of country. Jónas Jónsson (1828-1907), who emigrated to America during the difficult years of the late seventies, returned in 1889, celebrating his homecoming in a poem where he compared the comfortable climate, the fruitful earth and the prosperity of America with Iceland:

> Allt öðruvísi ertu fóstran góða
> þó ýngismeyja roðinn sje af kinn,
> og kæran vanti kornskerunnar gróða
> og kulda hregg á möttul falli þinn-
> þá ertu laus frá ofmetað og þjósti
> og illra svika þú ei hyllir ráð,
> en eldur brennur undir þínu brjósti
> sem örfar mann á framtak þol og dáð.
>
> (Lbs. 756-57, 8vo.)

Like the Danish-educated poets Jónas depicts Iceland as spiritually superior to foreign countries primarily because of its inherent lack of material wealth. He combines Bjarni Thorarensen's notion of "natural culture" with Breiðfjörð's homely endearments.

Half a century earlier unschooled poets had a different sense of patriotism. Breiðfjörð's poem "Við Reykjanes" is unmistakably patriotic, but it expresses a love of country quite different from the reverence of the Romantic poets. This love, though it survives adversity, is not the one-way loyalty to a motherland which demands total sacrifice on the part of its subjects. Breiðfjörð's analogy of a mother and child is very apt in respect of his demands of the parent:

> Móður mína háa að sjá
> mig sem börnin girnir,
> en ég fer þér aftur frá
> ef þú við mér spyrnir.
>
> (Ljóðasafn, I, 75)

The idea that the country owed a living to its inhabitants contrasted with the ethos of nationalism propounded by the þjóðskáld. Their aim was to help to create a love of country that would counteract self-interest. Their poetry brought a message of unity where loyalty to the motherland would override differences. In nationalistic nature poetry this notion progressively obscured diversity in attitudes arising from different social backgrounds and education, yet in 1874 such diversity was still expressed with conviction by several poets.

CHAPTER 6

The Golden Age

Nationalism by its very nature is a force drawing attention to the past. In literature, art, political writing and even music, nineteenth-century champions of national freedom sought examples from history to further their cause. The interrelationship between the Romantic movement and nationalism, particularly in Germany and Scandinavia, gave the Middle Ages special significance. Romanticism cast a glamour on medieval literature and culture, partly in reaction to Neo-classicism, but perhaps more important to reverse the post-Renaissance tendency to equate medieval German and Nordic history with barbarism. Although a sense of history and of contact with the early native literature of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries had persisted as a feature of Icelandic culture, the period 1830-74 gave impetus to a new kind of interest in the past. The nationalists began to look to the era of Settlement from the ninth century, to the close of the Commonwealth in 1262-64 as a Golden Age in the national history.

Surprisingly perhaps, the period produced no systematic nationalistic account of the Middle Ages. Historical and literary scholarship continued more or less in the style established during the previous century, classifying and editing the vast numbers of medieval manuscripts, kept mainly in Copenhagen. The endeavour to bring the ancient literature before a public was greatly assisted by the Íslenzka bókmenntafélag and the Fornfræðifélag, established respectively in 1816 and 1825. Icelandic students in Denmark shouldered the main burden of this task, receiving for the most part a meagre and piecemeal renumeration for their labours - in many cases a necessary supplement to notoriously irregular incomes. Among their numbers were the leading lights in literature and nationalism who felt that the study of the medieval literature was an important aspect of national reconstruction. A field that promised limited financial prospects became for many a consuming interest and enticed several students away from their chosen subjects, or diminished their interest in pursuing the traditional careers in law and theology. Gísli Brynjúlfsson abandoned the study of law and subsisted primarily on a scholarship from the Arnemagnean Trust until 1874 when he was appointed a lecturer in Icelandic studies in the University of Copenhagen. Benedikt Gröndal, though he remained passionately interested in his first choice, natural science - which provided him with a steady income when he returned to Iceland in 1874 - became a notable scholar of

Nordic philology and literature. The study of history in one form or another became extraordinarily popular during the nineteenth century; it was by no means the prerogative of university-educated men. It became a popular pastime among the clergy, and "folk scholars" such as Gísli Konráðsson (1787-1877) and Daði Níelsson (1809-56) who devoted a lifetime to history or antiquarianism. Although not easily determined, their influence on contemporary ideas must have been considerable. Their popularity is demonstrated not only in the many poetic tributes paid to them by their contemporaries, but also by the persistence of the tradition of "folk scholarship" to the present day.

During the period 1830-74, nationalism was the most important single influence on historical interpretation in Iceland. The first issue of Fjölnir categorically associated knowledge of history with patriotism:

> Hvur sem les íslenzku sögurnar með athygli, í honum verður að kvikna brennandi ást á ættjörðu sinni, eða hann skilur þær ekki sem vera ber. Víst er um það: mart er annað sem minna mætti sérhvurn Íslending á þessa ást, ef hann rennir augum sínum yfir grænu dalina, með hlíðarnar kvikar af nautum og sauðum og hrossum, og lítur niður í lækina, himintæra, - laxa og silúnga leika þar með sporðaköstum ... Og því fleiri lönd sem vér sjáum, því ákafar girnumst vér aptur til Íslanz. Enn viljir þú að marki, Íslendingur, fá ást á landinu þínu, þá blaðaðu í æfi þess, og kynntu þér allt það sem þar er skrifað af mentun og athöfnum feðra þinna. 1

This was written by Tómas Sæmundsson and echoed the views

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1 Fjölnir, I, 1835 , 2-3.

of his co-editors. In a letter to Konráð Gíslason in 1837, Jónas Hallgrímsson implied that the Sagas were an invaluable help in determining the future of Iceland: "Nú lauk ég við Njálu áðan, til að búa mig undir alþingiskomuna" (Rit, II, 17). Such direct emphasis on the relevance of the ancient literature, not only in a general sense but also in relation to contemporary politics was quite common. Most people, however, tended to be rather vague as to its precise function.

As nationalism increasingly became a practical goal after the eighteen-thirties, the poets' feeling for the Golden Age became more emotional. Unschooled poets nevertheless continued to use the ancient literature as entertainment in their rímur and often expressed the simple pleasure afforded by the Sagas and medieval poetry, especially when this included adventure and heroism. This is demonstrated in Sigurður Breiðfjörð's rímur about Gunnar Hámundarson (1836) where the mansöngur explicitly stressed the entertainment value of the Sagas. It is possible that the criticism of the rímur made poets more conscious of their themes. Certainly Breiðfjörð seems to have been thinking about the subject since in his Rímur af Gísla Súrsyni (1838) he argued at length that a knowledge of its native past is absolutely necessary for a civilised society. He now appeared to be convinced that history stimulates a desire to emulate the superior example of one's forefathers and that it is precisely man's ability to retain a memory

of the past that distinguishes him from the animals:

> Ef engin myndum dæmi af dauðum,
> dofna fyndist hyggjan smá,
> værum blindir, verri sauðum,
> við kvikindum líktumst þá. 2

With somewhat greater sophistication, Gísli Brynjúlfsson argued a similar case in Norðurfari. He attempts to demonstrate that history is a subject whose purpose it is to preserve the past; by its very nature it embodies true knowledge and wisdom. On a more practical level, history was used to provide arguments in the political debate with the Danish Government that was gathering momentum around the mid-century. Jón Sigurðsson, whose stature as one of the major medieval scholars of the period has been overshadowed by his political activity, based his constitutional policy on the validity of the Covenant of 1262, thus following the notorious example of the Schleswig-Holsteiners who in their nationalistic struggle with Denmark appealed to a similar historical precedent.

The historical point of view associated with the period 1830-74 is in short the now familiar interpretation of the Settlement and the Commonwealth as Golden Age, overshadowing every other era in Icelandic history. Two generations of historians and readers reared on nationalistic school histories were affected by this interpretation. A recent article on Icelandic

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2 Sýnisbók íslenzkra rímna, III, 355.

historiography since the nineteenth century uses Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Ísland" to make a point about Icelandic nationalism.[3] The author argues that the poem presents a historical interpretation which prevailed among historians until active nationalism began gradually to lose its impact after Home Rule in 1918, but especially after 1944. Probably the single most-quoted source to demonstrate the Romantic nationalist's attitude to the past, the poem concentrates on three major aspects represented by the Golden Age. The period was above all regarded as an era embodying national freedom, reflected primarily in the Alþing, the institution demonstrating the corporate justice and wisdom of the forefathers. A desire for freedom from feudal oppression was seen as the main impetus for the search for a new land; and characteristically Jónas drew attention to the perfect match between Icelandic nature and the freedom-loving settlers. Secondly, the men of the Golden Age had the attributes of fame and courage, derived from their heroism and quality which commanded the respect of foreign monarchs and noblemen. Thirdly, their life-style was marked by virtue reflected primarily in their achievement of a balance between colourful heroism, leadership and law abiding farming/

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3 Harald Gustafsson, "Isländsk medeltid. Gamla och nya perspektiv," Historisk Tidskrift, IV, 1980, 514-25.

trading existence. The Alþing - the most important symbol of the Golden Age in Jónas's poem - was central to the disagreement in the forties between the Romantic nationalist associated with Fjölnir and Jón Sigurðson. Its discontinuation in 1800 provided Jónas with a perfect imagery to convey what he regarded as the gradual decay in Icelandic society after the thirteenth century. This was for the Fjölnir group a culmination of the "six hundred summers" of apathy and inactivity. "Ísland" is not a typical didactic poem where the message dominates the artistic quality of the work as a whole. It is nevertheless intended as a clarion call arousing the nationalistic sentiment of the nation, and depicts the past in order to further the cause of nationalism. Unlike many similar poems, "Ísland" does not depend on narrative but shows a concern with a marriage of theme, structure and form characteristic of the literary renaissance which Jónas's work exemplifies.

Jónas was absolutely typical of his own and the subsequent generation of educated poets in his uncritical view of the Middle Ages. The theme and the imagery in "Ísland" set a fashion for poetry written specifically to celebrate national and local events, in some way related to the political issues of the time or with progress. Thus the concept of the Golden Age developed unequivocally in the service of nationalism as Jónas intended. The basic premise for nineteenth-century historical interpretation

was an implicit trust in the Sagas and the ancient poetry as a historical source. The former were written after the introduction of Christianity and their authors were in all probability not only Christians, but members of the clerical hierarchy. Yet they were regarded by most poets as a reliable account of the social and moral outlook of the pagan settlers. Ironically many poets who idealised the Sagas as a true account of the past and literary masterpieces, argued that the Catholic clergy had contributed to the destruction of the Golden Age. Nevertheless, a few Icelanders had a relatively sophisticated view of history as a discipline. Gísli Brynjúlfsson, a historian and a poet, argued during the mid-century that past historians wrote from the point of view of an élite and had disregarded the oppression of the silent majorities of the nations. He suggested that historians should strive for objectivity and consider the activities and ideas of all sections of society who, he claimed, had always influenced the events described by history. In practice this kind of thinking - somewhat futuristic in the context of Icelandic historiography - was not applied to the study of the Middle Ages, even by Gísli himself.

Icelandic literary historians have not considered in any depth the possibility that a correlation may have existed between poets' attitude to nationalism and their social and economic status or education. In his History of

Icelandic Poets 1800-1940 Richard Beck stressed that the critical attitude consistently expressed in Hjálmar Jónsson's poetry must be seen in the light of his experience in a hostile world. More recently, Heimir Pálsson has suggested that this aspect of Hjálmar's "þjóðfundarsöngur" (1851) resembles the social realism of the last decades of the century.[4] Hjálmar's attitude to society and nationalism has usually been regarded as an anomaly in the age of Romanticism, perhaps a legacy of eighteenth-century attitudes or a highly personal view of an unconventional character. It is indeed true that as one of the major literary figures of the nineteenth century - albeit recognised only in retrospect - Hjálmar must be seen as exceptional. Nevertheless, his critical view of society reflects a point of view expressed directly or indirectly by numerous unschooled poets of lesser literary merit. Social attitudes impinged forcefully on the interpretation of the past - much more so than on love of country - but it would be misleading to describe this as a direct correlation between social status and historical interpretation. This is partly because of the difficulty of establishing a categorical demarcation between social and educational groups in Iceland in this period. Yet there is a marked difference in emphasis, particularly between on the one hand the unschooled poets

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4 Straumar og stefnur, p.92.

and those who received university education on the other.

The nationalistic interpretation of the Golden Age was initially developed by the Danish educated poets who tended to be élitist in their ideas about literature. Educated nationalists in Iceland may have differed considerably in this respect from their counterparts elsewhere in Scandinavia. Nationalists in Norway, for example, regarded Nordic mythology and folklore as a clear manifestation of the "folk spirit" of the Nordic race, or more specifically the Norwegians. The common folk, notably the bonde, "the yeoman farmer" - who admittedly was not on the lowest rung of the social ladder - and his language and customs were seen as a living link with the Nordic past. Danish-educated Icelanders on the other hand were often harshly critical of the contemporary "folk" and their way of life. Not only did they attack popular verse-forms such as the rímur, but a great many of their "Iceland-poems" are highly condescending to the people's deviation from the character of the "race". It is only after the middle of the century that a few literati began, in a somewhat guarded fashion, to look consciously to contemporary popular poetry for inspiration. The later Romantics even wrote rímur, but by the time educated poets had ceased to see the genre as a blight on the national culture the rímur were already on the way out.

Significantly the Danish-educated poets did not

emulate their Scandinavian counterparts such as Oehlenschläger and Tegnér, who on "discovering" the medieval Nordic past wrote epic or dramatic poetry based on Nordic or Icelandic literature. Translations of their work, however, became popular in Iceland mainly through the efforts of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson and Matthías Jochumsson. One reason for this difference in ideas about the past may well derive from the tendency of Icelandic nationalists to elevate the ancient literature from a source of entertainment to a national heritage, to be treated with reverence and purpose. It is significant in this context that the rímur-poets increasingly abandoned the Sagas or Norse mythology as themes in favour of novels of foreign origins.

The problem of comparing the attitudes to the past of the educated and the unschooled poets is accentuated by the difference in poetic style especially before the mid-century. Jónas's "Ísland" had no immediate impact on unschooled poets, not only because of its alien form, but also perhaps because of its apparent pessimism regarding the present. Many people, especially the older generation, attacked Fjölnir for degrading the country. In contrast, students at Bessastaðir were quick to recognise the freshness of the periodical which appealed to those who desired change. Although the metre of "Ísland" did not achieve popularity, even among younger poets, its imagery and attitude to nature and history became a foundation of

what is usually seen as a typically Romantic attitude to the past. Educated poets of the period 1830-74 began to emphasise the aesthetic aspect of poetry thus widening the gap between themselves and the unschooled poets, more at home with the traditional rhyme of the occasional quatrain and the extended narrative of the rímur. The historical poem was therefore adopted by the latter with some confidence as a means to express nationalistic sentiments. Conventional genres such as the aldarháttur and the heimsósómi were adapted to express nationalism. History with its inherent narrative structure was a subject that accorded well with existing poetic traditions, and many farmers and clergymen wrote historical narrative poetry about the period from the Settlement to their own day. The educated poets, on the other hand rarely treated historical matters in this way.

The only educated poet who appears to have been inspired by Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Ísland" to write a historical narrative poem was Jón Thoroddsen (1818-68). The first successful Icelandic novelist, Jón was also a poet of some merit who wrote numerous narrative poems but is better known for several lyrics that have survived as popular songs. A student of law in Copenhagen in 1841-50 and 1853-4, Jón was a co-editor of Norðurfari before volunteering to fight in the Danish army against the Schleswig-Holsteiners in 1848 - a most unusual step for an Icelander. Unlike lyrics such as "Ó fögur er vor

fósturjörð", the long poem "Til Íslendinga", which appeared in the first edition of his poetry in 1871, is almost unknown. Whereas Jónas's "Ísland" is only fourteen quatrains with lines of six to eight syllables, "Til Íslendinga" consists of fifty-one quatrains depending for effect on detail and elaboration of the theme. It has a strong didactic tone emphasised by the poet's sense of distance from his readers. The influence of Jónas is demonstrated quite unambiguously in the theme, the metre and the imagery. Both poets have a typically Romantic view of nature and of history, focusing on the beauty of the land and simplifying the character of past society.

In the long preamble of "Til Íslendinga", Jón tried to demonstrate that the unchanging beauty of the land was a constant reminder of the Golden Age. The idea clearly comes from Jónas who in contrast used only one stanza to highlight the complex relationship between nature and the people; continuity is forcefully conveyed simply by repeating the stanza with a subtle change from past to present tense. Jón draws attention to the freedom of the Golden Age, the courage of the forefathers, their ability as poets and their fame in royal courts abroad, which made them rich and glamourous when they returned home. One of his central themes is that as leaders and poets the forefathers were socially conscious. They did not simply mock the faint-hearted out of arrogance or pride but with the intention of inspiring them with the valour fitting

for all Icelanders. Like many of his contemporaries, Jón admired the Golden Age equally for its heroic spirit and the wisdom and justice of its lawmakers:

> Eins og í bardaga brandi
> að beita vel feðurnir kunnu,
> eins fyrir lýði og láð
> lögmálin stilltu þeir vel.
>
> (Kvæði, p.16)

The poem depicts the forefathers as men of character and quality who owed their position and status in the community to merit rather than simply to birth and material wealth. Jón uses a quote from Grettirs saga to reinforce the importance of this characteristic of Icelandic society:

> sá, sem var öðrum að auð
> og ætt og metorðum fremri,
> hann vildi ei höfðingja nafn
> hafa með kotúnga lund;
> 'þess verður getið sem gjört er'
> sögðu feðurnir frægu,
> heldur því kusu þeir hel
> en hjara að látinni sæmd.
>
> (Kvæði, p.15)

The forefathers were seen as leaders who not only valued honour, loyalty and freedom but also had a peculiarly unaristocratic attitude to physical labour. On their return home from a glamourous and heroic life abroad, they became hard working prosperous farmers; an idea that reflects a characteristic regard for hard work in Icelandic society. This view was presented by Jónas Hallgrímsson but became particularly popular among unschooled poets:

> Reistu sér byggðir og bú
> í blómguðu dalanna skauti.
>
> (Rit, I, 41)

Jón's image of the forefathers as successful farmers, however, appears peculiarly like that of Eggert Ólafsson's farmer in Búnaðarbálkur:

> Því að þeir vissu það víst,
> að virðing með stjórnsemi kemur,
> auðsæl er iðjandi hönd,
> aldregi letinginn þrífst

(Kvæði, p.16)

Characteristically there is no mention of the majority, those who were guided by the socially conscious leadership and the example of the forefathers. Like most educated poets of the period, Jón described the Golden Age as a society of chiefs and never showed any interest in the lower orders.

In the section dealing with the decline and fall of the Commonwealth, Jón faces the perennial problem of the nationalist poet of how to span the bridge between the excellence of the Golden Age and the total degradation believed to have existed in the following centuries. He chose the classic solution of putting the blame of the "fall" on greedy individuals ensnared by scheming foreigners. With the loss of freedom, fame and energy weaken and die and the nation is brought under the yoke of the traditional enemies, the clergy and foreign aristocrats. Bereft of their leaders, the people drift helplessly into an abyss of crime and poverty:

> Þá hófst upp ómensku öld
> og ódygðir ríktu í sveitum,
> varmennska, volæði, eymd
> vesælum grandaði lýð;

(Kvæði, p.17)

Though God sends warnings exhorting the people to revert to an ordered lifestyle, they are unable to resist foreign oppression. The nation undergoes a metamorphosis; a country populated by leaders has turned into a passive and nameless mass:

> Þögul og þolinmóð lá
> þjóðin úr reyfinu klippt.
>
> (Kvæði, p.17)

Like most nineteenth-century nationalists, Jón paid scant attention to the centuries after the Commonwealth. The period from the mid-thirteenth century to the Reformation was usually seen as a dark age when the country was ruled by corrupt clergy and the people were unable or unwilling to resist. Jónas gave a precedent for dismissing the period after the Commonwealth and up to the nineteenth century as the lost "six hundred summers", a phrase often plagiarised in subsequent poetry. Though not convincing in view of the Icelander's general distrust of officialdom and disregard of the law endemic after the Reformation, the view that the population had been passive and lethargic for centuries became an accepted historical truth during the nineteenth century. Jónas's description of the inactivity in Iceland was almost pastoral in tone:

> Nú er hún Snorrabúð stekkur,
> og lyngið á Lögbergi helga
> blánar af berjum hvert ár,
> börnum og hröfnum að leik.
>
> (Rit, I, 42)

Many educated poets used harsher words to describe the way of life led by the ordinary Icelander and Jón's choice of imagery to depict his countrymen was more typical:

> sokkin í svefndoða kyrð,
> sællífi, munað og glys;
>
> (Kvæði, p.15)

The last part of "Til Íslendinga" demonstrates that there is an important lesson to be learnt from the Golden Age. But whereas Jónas addressed the nation as a whole and moreover brought himself into the same orbit as his audience - "Hvað er nú orðið um okkar starf" - Jón propounds a different message to the ruled and the rulers. The latter - "Þér, sem að flokknum í fremst / til forustu þjóðinni standið" - are advised to develop a sense of social duty and emulate the forefathers' concern with effective rule by law and example and to abandon the love of power for its own sake which Jón considers a great problem in Iceland. The ruled - "En þú alþýðu stétt" - are told to look to the ancients for an example of energetic living and honesty. The munaðarlíf of the ordinary Icelander is a recurrent theme in Jón's work - ironical perhaps in a period when only a very small minority of the population had the means to live even a relatively comfortable life. In "Til Íslendinga" Jón clearly admires the forefathers for making their mark abroad, bringing home riches as a reward for their service to kings and noblemen. Yet he admonishes the common folk for their interest in foreign things and custom:

aðfengið glíngur og glys,
ginnir og veikir þitt afl.
.....
..... því undir
yfirhöfn útlendri dylst
optlega biturlegt sverð.

(Kvæði, p.21)

For Jón, as for most of his educated contemporaries, foreign influence endangered the national character. The emphasis on social differences in the poem - and in a great deal of Jón's work - is highlighted in the last stanza directed to the people:

Veittu þeim vasklega fylgd
sem vilja þig götuna leiða
frama og farsælda til,
frelsis og manndáðastig.

(Kvæði, p.21)

It is significant that most historical narrative poems were written by an older generation of unschooled poets. With few exceptions the form did not attract the generation born after about the 1820s. The chronological narrative in particular was too rigid and laborious for poets favouring the new style of writing which depended on imagination and originality in form and subject-matter. Use of rigid and traditional verse-forms without modification usually reflected a lingering adherence to eighteenth-century attitudes: unselfconscious didacticism, belief in the necessity of a social hierarchy and an emphasis on the more practical aspects of knowledge. Although "Til Íslendinga" is very clearly influenced by Jónas's poetic style, its message and attitudes contradict

the nationalistic ethos. The poem in fact retains many of the same features that characterise the patriotic works of Eggert Ólafsson.

The historian Jón Espólín (1769-1836) wrote an aldarháttur in 1832 - the year when Eggert's Kvæði were published. The poem not only reflects an admiration of Eggert's work but also matches his archaic language and turgid style. It is so obscure in places that the elaborate annotation was probably necessary even for his contemporaries. The poem is in three parts: an introduction, ancient history and the present. Like Eggert in his "Ísland", Jón devotes the longest part to the present. The poem conveys very well the ideas of the Enlightenment in its combination of serious reflection, moderate Christianity, didacticism and the complete lack of humour. Jón characteristically placed the main emphasis on qualities which show the forefathers as men of wisdom and plain honesty rather than colourful heroes. They are depicted as stoic, moral, almost ascetic, men of few but significant words. Jón has no apparent interest in landscape or in the beauty of Icelandic nature. His attitude to the land is essentially practical and historical. Although he believed that Iceland was richer and less eroded during the Middle Ages than in the present, he concludes that it must always have been difficult to farm; never yielding an easy sustenance to its people. He supports this idea with reference to

Konungsskuggsjá where a thirteenth-century Norwegian describes Iceland as barely habitable, compared to other countries:

> þóttu lendr lítt byggiandi
> er líkt á stóð hinum sælli þjóðum.
>
> (Lbs. 1460, 4to.)

Jón's view of Icelandic nature reflects his belief in the superior character of the early Icelanders whose great merit was an ability to provide a good livelihood for a large population in a harsh land, and to turn adversity to their advantage.

Jón's poetry reflects an unusual regard for historical objectivity. In this poem he argued that values change from one age to another and clearly tried, albeit with unequal success, to look at the past on its own terms. Thus, unlike the þjóðskáld, he did not praise the justice and legal system of the Settlement and the Commonwealth uncritically:

> í dóma giorðum voru vyrðar
> vel réttlátir á sinn máta.
>
> (Lbs. 1460, 4to.)

On balance Jón did not regard this period as a Golden Age. Although he constantly tried to weigh its good qualities against its shortcoming, the basis for his historical evaluation was nevertheless his own concept of morality in private and public behaviour. This was in many ways a typically Enlightened attitude, a firm belief in a cultured, humanitarian and well ordered society based on

reason and a Christian mode of life by each individual, rather than enforcement of law and order from above. In his extensive annotations he attempted to clarify the difference betwen the attitudes that prevailed in the past and those of the present. Abhorring violence and brutality, he argues cogently that the Settlement period drew its crudities from paganism which gave licence to personal excesses. The practice of revenge through acts such as burning people in their houses is described as repulsive and barbaric. Yet Jón concedes that in many cases this was an act of desperation, a last resort to seek redress against an unjust and an arrogant élite, disregarding just grievances. His main complaint about the period was that its leaders failed to live constantly and consistently as an example to their social inferiors. The greatest blight on the period, he claims with passion, is slavery, a subject that most nineteenth-century poets evaded completely. Tyranny accorded ill with the idealisation of the forefathers as guardians of national independence, and freedom and justice for each individual. Jón's professed desire to consider every aspect of his subject is justified in his honesty; he did not shrink from discussing what he regarded as an unpleasant and discreditable feature of the Golden Age:

> marga þræla héldu halir,
> harðir voru þeim og stórum
> stundum dauða seldu síðast
> sinn fyrir hag og missir baga.
>
> (Lbs. 1460, 4to.)

Jón's awareness of the outside world - he had been a student in Copenhagen - provided a comparison with the slavery of the American negro, a comparison which allowed the poet to claim that the forefathers were "ei svo harðir sem nokkrir í Americu á vorum dögum eru við sína þræla" (Lbs. 1460, 4to.).

In contrast to most of his younger contemporaries Jón appears eminently objective in his evaluation of the past which makes his analysis of the reasons for the fall of the Commonwealth relatively easy. He takes a long-term view arguing that the transitions from prosperity to misery was gradual:

> Skiptiz hún, þó eigi í einu,
> allt smám saman hefur framist.
>
> (Lbs. 1460, 4to.)

Here, as in his hatred of Catholicism, Jón was a typical product of the Scandinavian Enlightenment. He regarded Christianity in Iceland with suspicion; it was pure only for a very short time because superstition, violence and dishonesty inevitably followed from Catholicism, even in a society that was for the most past naturally moral, dynamic and productive. The loss of independence and subsequent dearths and plague were but a part of a gradual decline. Jón provided no simple explanation; but the remaining thirty-six stanzas make it clear that he regarded selfish individualism as the main hindrance to progress, particularly among those with wealth and status. Jón advises the present to look to the past but with a

critical eye. Like Eggert he not only places his faith in the future and in the hope of a reformed Christianity, but also in moderation and humane conduct in all aspects of life.

Although Jón´s ideas and the way they were presented were on the way out when he wrote the aldarháttur, his view of the past was quite common at the time and persisted throughout the period among older versemakers. An interesting example of this can be found in the work of Helgi Árnason (1822-88) who was known as fróði. Helgi, as his nickname suggests, was one of Iceland´s many "folk scholars" and poets who travelled the country sporadically working on farms or in fishing but often quite literally earning a living by their wits in one way or another. Helgi wrote a historical narrative poem strongly influenced by Eggert´s "Ísland". Although the date of the poem is uncertain, its style and ideas suggest a mature work - probably written in the late sixties or the seventies. Employing a similar metre but a less archaic language, the poem is even longer than "Ísland". It is divided into three sections, addressed to what Helgi considered to be the three social classes in the country: the crown officials, the clergy and the common people. The aims of the two works are similar, and the final and largest part is taken up with advising and admonishing the three "classes". Helgi´s attitude reflects many contemporary notions about religion and politics, but his historical view is strongly

influenced by his lowly social and economic status. Thus his main condemnation is of oppression, firstly foreign domination of the Icelandic nation which he dates from 1262:

> Nú er öldin ekki/ísagrundin frí,
> Harða þrældóms hlekki
> Henni smeigði í
> Hákon Noregs filkir first;
> Undir síðan ánauðar -
> Oki hefur gist.
>
> (Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

Like many poets of his background, Helgi was fervently anti-Danish and considered their rule in Iceland far more oppressive than that of the Norwegian kings. His real venom against tyranny, however, is not directed at kings or foreigners but at his own countrymen, an Icelandic élite that oppressed their kith and kin:

> Harðir kúgarar
> Af íslensku blóði,
> Oss til bölvunar,
> Forhert gátu marga menn;
> Þjóðarfjendur þeir urðu
> það kyn lifir enn.
>
> (Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

The poem thus traces the ancestry of contemporary crown officials and clergy to a race of traitors that became established during the Commonwealth. Helgi's traditional anti-Catholic sentiments make him value the Reformation, but his hatred of the clergy, an inseparable part of this perfidious race of oppressors, debars him from praising Luther's contribution to church government and a true religion in Iceland:

Luther nokkuð lægði
Leiðra klerka vömm,
.....
En í ránsfeng allan þó
Dauðahaldi hjeldu þeir
Harðri meður kló.

(Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

Not surprisingly, Helgi explains the decline of the Golden Age in very different terms from those usually found in the classic nationalistic poem of his educated contemporaries. He was at one with the many unschooled poets who blamed the decline in the country's fortunes on the feuds and factiousness of the Sturlungs. But his idea that they were the first of an entrenched élite of oppressors of the alþýða was highly original.

It is probably true that most ordinary Icelanders saw crown officials, and to a certain extent the clergy, as a potential or genuine oppressive element in Icelandic society. Many higher officials were notoriously unpopular among ordinary people - for example, the amtmaður and poet, Bjarni Thorarensen. These were the authority that people encountered in their daily affairs, and the nineteenth-century poetry complaining of high-handed officialdom or deriding individuals, is well known. Helgi's unusual notions of the past is primarily the implication that during the Commonwealth the nation began to separate into leaders and the led. The term þjóðarfjendur, used in this poem, suggests that Helgi saw the Sturlung's power-struggle as a crime against the people which separated them and their successors from the

rest of the population. His notion of a nation as the people was consistent and extraordinarily radical in the context of Icelandic poetry. Many of his ideas were nevertheless founded on generally held opinions about Icelandic society, a sense of inequality and social differences only superficially hidden by the absence of economic prosperity and relative informality of social intercourse. Most poets in the period convey an awareness of the divisiveness in Icelandic society, but only a few brought this to bear on their interpretation of the Golden Age.

To succeed, however, nationalism must gravitate towards issues which command a general consensus. Thus in order that it may serve nationalism, history must focus on those aspects of the past that foster unity. This was the overriding trend in the historical interpretation of the Middle Ages in the works of the bjóðskáld from Jónas Hallgrímsson onwards. The kinds of subjects they strove to associate with nationalism were Icelandic nature - or love of country - pride in the native language and a glorification of the common ancestry. Benedikt Gröndal, Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, Gísli Brynjúlfsson and Matthías Jochumsson followed Jónas's example of attempting to unite the Icelanders in spirit rather than in politics. For the most part they ignored diversity of opinions and backgrounds. Fostering a love of country as the supreme test of nationality was perhaps the pivot of this unity,

but historical interpretation of the Middle Ages as the Golden Age came a close second. In their "Iceland-poems" they generally tried to avoid sensitive issues, concentrating rather on visual imagery and emotions which appealed to the senses rather than argument and reason. The treatment of freedom is a case in point. The freedom of the Golden Age was of prime relevance to a new future when independence would be restored to the nation. Gröndal, although he usually employed a more hyperbolic language than most poets, was characteristically loath to discuss the subject in depth or define its terms. As early as 1853 he was writing poetry which said little about freedom but made it a supreme quality of the Golden Age:

> Því frelsið lifði, fáðum stutt af málmi,
> og fögrum skildi og þúngri orra-staung,
> og sólin glóði glæstum yfir hjálmi,
> og gjörvallt landið kvað þá frelsis-saung -
>
> (Kvæðabók, p.42)

Freedom guarded by the sword was peculiarly irrelevant in the context of either the Middle Ages or the nineteenth century: Icelandic history is not notable for wars with other nations.

Gröndal's poetry reflects the very superficial interest in the past which characterised the poetry of the later generation of Romantics. They glorified the Golden Age in a general and imprecise manner, and created a vivid impression of the ancients. Jónas used the past exclusively to stimulate the national pride of his readers

and his success is manifested in the work of subsequent þjóðskáld. Gröndal was so moved by the past that in numerous poems it merges with nature to create a glorious personal experience. This poetry was typical of the Romantic movement in its subjectivity and the highly personal response to the idea of the Golden Age:

> Lít jeg inn á liðna öld,
> laungu þakta haugum,
> þar sem felur skjöldur skjöld
> skært í ljósabaugum:
> Er sem kveði Egill enn
> undir sólar tjaldi
> og þar hlusti margir menn
> moldar orpnir faldi.
>
> (Kvæðabók, p.198)

Steingrímur had a very similar attitude to the Golden Age. Although he described the period in a marginally less exalted fashion than Gröndal, he places the same emphasis on a colourful mode of life and an association of freedom with heroism:

> Gengin er tíð, þá lopt og lög
> Valkyrjur riðu í leiptra ljóma,
> Við sverða skin og skjaldar hljóma
> Og kystu harðan Hildar mög,
> Þegar að fleyin sköruð skjöldum
> Skriðu að þínum ströndum köldum,
> Þá konungborið kappa lið
> Kaus sér að deyja brjóst þitt við.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.1)

In this kind of poetry the past became a hazy image almost devoid of human problems. There is no evidence of the Saga writers' concern with conflict, social change or the complexities of social relationships. The Golden Age, like the parallel themes of nature and the language, was

above all a symbol of the latent potential of the nation, a potential that educated poets were quite unable to justify by reference to contemporary society. The idealisation of the Middle Ages reached its zenith in the Romantic phase between 1848 and 1874, at a time when a better future was gradually becoming a real possibility. Although Steingrímur was not historically inclined, and wrote more convincingly about the future than the past, his was a most eloquent testimony to the way the Romantic poet envisaged the Golden Age:

> Þér munið fræga frelsisins öld
> Hve fögur var gullaldar stundin
> Þá sól skein á stálklæddu feðranna fjöld
> Og frjálsbornu, svanhvítu sprundin
> Þá lífið svall alfrjálst með æskunnar blóði
> Af ástum og drengskap og hetjumóði.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.14)

With some notable exceptions, unschooled poets of Steingrímur's generations attempted to emulate this kind of poetry particularly on important occasions such as in 1874. Only a few of them, however, emphasised unity in a similar way by avoiding sensitive subjects and references to the social and economic grievances that were felt by many farmers and their workers. Most of these poets were genuinely interested in co-operation and frequently referred to the fellowship which they believed had existed among the ancients. On his way to Iceland from Denmark in 1856, Jón Mýrdal was stimulated by the sight of Norway to write about the early Icelanders. The usual glorification of freedom, heroism and courage culminates in an emphasis

on social cohesion and association as the essence of the early past:

> fóstbræðralag og fjelag traust
> fast saman bundu prettalaust.
>
> (Grýla, p.11)

These were in fact the ideals that unschooled poets stressed most often in relation to the present and the future. Not surprisingly the Golden Age was often given those qualities a particular group of poets or individuals desired most in their own community, the nation or even in their private life - a diversity made possible by the broad scope of the Sagas and the ancient poetry. Farmers in particular stressed the need to join together to put the country on its feet. Einar Andrésson (1814-91) reflected this attitude very clearly when he admired the forefathers' sense of social unity in his millennial poem:

> Fögur er feðranna saga
> fornar sem ritgerðir lýsa,
> félagsskap, framtök og starf
> fléttuðu samheldnis bönd.
>
> Látum í þjóðerni lifa
> lofsverðust feðranna dæmi,
> kappkostum dugnað og dáð,
> drengskap og samtökin holl.[5]

During the decades before 1874 a growing interest in national and social unity among Icelandic farmers, was demonstrated in the establishment of local associations of various kinds and a growing membership of national societies

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5 Einar Andrésson í Bólu, ed. Finnur Sigmundsson, Menn og minjar, VI (Reykjavík, 1949), 25.

such as the Bókmenntafélag. Not surprisingly a desire for co-operation was a strong feature in the poetry of men such as Jón Hinriksson (1829-1921). A relatively prosperous, modest but active member of his parish, Jón belonged to the class of people who formed the backbone of Jón Sigurðsson's support. Celebrating 1874, Jón thus placed the greatest emphasis on the social characteristics of the Golden Age. On moderation, legal justice, co-operation, trustworthiness and security which overshadow heroism and even freedom.

Most unschooled poets at some point depicted the forefathers as heroic fighters in the favourite style of the rímur audience. Nevertheless, the ancients' apparent ability to prosper as farmers, probably the ultimate goal of most ordinary Icelanders for the better part of the century, was greatly admired. The forefathers could be depicted at the same time as colourful heroes, and peace-loving and shrewd managers of their farms. The most dramatic accounts are to be found in the works of rímur poets who, like Sigurður Breiðfjörð, could conjure up an image of crazed heroes fighting for their last breath because of their women or their honour. In one of his poems, Breiðfjörð depicts the ancient heroes, bleeding to death after a battle, yet uttering a last breath in pure poetry:

Þá vissi ég heyja hildar þrá
hamremmistryllta Íslendinga,
bláklæddir stóðu í brynjum hringa
Gunnar sterki og Grettir þá.
Menn festu konu, en fyrir hana
fengu tíðum á hólmi bana.
Deyjandi munnur orti óð,
þá oddur spjóts í hjarta stóð.

(Ljóðmæli, I, 69-70)

Unschooled poets sometimes expressed their grievance at being underrated by their contemporaries, and compared the present to the Golden Age when poets commanded respect and were rewarded appropriately. Breiðfjörð - although he was extraordinarily popular and one of the few poets who earned a kind of living by his rímur - often complained about the decline in the status of his profession:

Hafðir voru hæstu þeir í metum;
kónga sinna hægri hlið
höfðu jafnan sæti við.

En virðing okkar vikin er til baka;
skeyta lítið skrumi því
skildinganna mónarkí. 6

Lýður Jónsson (1800-76), a well known versemarker in his time, but always a poor farmhand and fisherman, often expressed similar sentiments. In "Barðavísur" (1847) he imagines the respect and position he would have held had he lived in the Golden Age:

Vildi eg hafa verið þá
vísur til að ljóða,
mundi hafa mér sú gná
mannlegt kaupið bjóða.

---

6 Sýnisbók íslenzkra rímna, III, 296-97.

Auðæfana mesta megn,
mér í skaut þá fjelli;
hefði eg orðið heiðurs þegn
höfðínglegur á velli.

(Íb. 636, 8vo.)

After the thirties the Golden Age became increasingly a refrain in nationalistic poetry which was clearly recognised by everyone as a profession of patriotism or more important, as a clarion call for an awakening and national independence. Nevertheless most unschooled poets retained an individual and sometimes an original attitude to the past. An interesting example of this is the peculiar poetic debate about Hallgerður, the much maligned wife of the Saga-hero Gunnar Hámundarson. The first poem in the debate was written by Sigurður Breiðfjörð sometime during the late twenties and appeared in print in 1836. Although not an example of his poetic artistry, the poem became well known and obviously a source of argument. Many poets condemned this defence of a wife who denied her husband a lock from her hair to restring his bow, a matter of life and death in the Saga. In the poem Breiðfjörð argues that although Hallgerður's was a bitter temper, she was provoked by Gunnar's general disregard of his duties as a husband and his irresponsible behaviour. The poem is clearly lighthearted, but it provoked some serious response among the numerous verse-makers such as Lýður Jónsson and Gísli Konráðsson who attacked Breiðfjörð for distorting truth. The debate was one of many similar disagreements that nineteenth-century

poets conducted in verse, sometimes in dead earnest and bitter acrimony, but more often in a lighter mood. The enthusiasm which poets could bring to an apparently innocuous subject demonstrates the general interest in the Sagas and the firm belief in the relevance and validity of the literature of the Middle Ages. This particular debate about a favourite Saga was serious, yet had its element of pure entertainment. It continued sporadically for decades, highlighting the unschooled poets' persistent interest in the Sagas and the personal as well as the nationalistic appeal of the past.

Jón Mýrdal, born in 1825, at about the time Breiðfjörð wrote the first version of his poem, may have had the last word in the debate. He makes Hallgerður defend her own case:

> aflabrögðin ei ganga greitt,
> Gunnar sķeitir um ekki neitt
> ein má eg í því standa.
>
> Hans lofstýr þjóðin hátt fram bar,
> honum þegar jeg gefin var,
> þá kosti jeg ei þekki;
> því vinsældir og hreysti hans,
> hafið af tungu sjerhvers manns
> í aska læt jeg ekki.

(Grýla, p.99)

Few poets of the period spoke up for the forgotten wives of the restless men of the Golden Age. To depict one of the elevated and popular heroes of the Romantic nationalists as a useless provider and a loutish husband took some courage, particularly as the poem, like all Jón's work, was utterly devoid of humour. The fact that

only a few unschooled poets could produce poetry that stood comparison with their educated colleagues, or came up to the aesthetic standards demanded by the literary renaissance, cannot undermine the spirited and individual interpretation that many of them produced of the past. In spite of the fact that most of this production is less than an inspiring literary experience, it often demonstrates a thoughtful interpretation of a past age, and is probably no less truthful than a vision of heroes in shining armour defending an imaginary freedom.

The second generation of Romantic poets were undoubtedly less concerned with the past than were their educated predecessors. Their presentation of the Golden Age was in reality not a rendering of the past or an attempt to understand historical developments, but rather part and parcel of their desire to reshape a new society for the future. After the mid-century, they not only expressed a desire for change but also a new feeling that change was imminent. Change and erosion of living things, a typical Romantic theme, was the subject of different types of poetry. These poems were sometimes overtly nationalistic, clearly referring to the political developments in the period, or simply conveying an overwhelming sense of the precariousness of life in a world dominated by time. Romanticism, by placing special emphasis on the individual consciousness and on a historical rather than religious view of the development

of man, gave rise to poetry where time plays an important role. Self-awareness and an interest in history, combined perhaps with a decreasing interest in the life hereafter, brought the transience of human existence into stark relief. This attitude is reflected in the Romantics' premonition of an early death and their desire with living life to the full while it lasts, regardless of conventions. Even in its latter phase, during the third quarter of the century, Icelandic Romanticism rarely produced poetry expressing extremes of exultation or emotion. Nevertheless, the Romantic imagery often underlines on one hand an evanescence, and a desire for a glorious, if brief, life on earth. This is reflected in many poems written during the third quarter of the century; even the national anthem, written for the millennial celebration in 1874, evokes a strong sense of the transience of human existence. It is perhaps not surprising that the national anthem should be a hymn contrasting the shortness of man's life to God's eternal existence. The poem contradicts the general belief of most previous poets that Iceland was extremely old:

> Fyrir þér er einn dagur sem þúsund ár,
> og þúsund ár dagur, ei meir,
> eitt eilífðar smáblóm með titrandi tár,
> sem tilbiður Guð sinn og deyr.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.1)

After the mid-century, the Romantic poets begin to express a new concern with the future. The Golden Age was still glorified in no uncertain terms, but educated

poets generally were less pessimistic about the future of the country. Among younger poets, in particular, there was an increasing assurance that progress was inevitable in the not-too-distant future. To some extent a typically nineteenth-century belief in the possibility of unlimited progress accorded well with the ideas of many relatively prosperous farmer-poets who had never accepted the view that ordinary Icelanders were completely lacking in the qualities so greatly admired in their forefathers. The pastor and farmer Magnús Grímsson expressed a characteristic faith in progress in his poem "Umbreytingin":

> Framför öll,
> fagnaðar stoð,
> frelsis sól,
> mentun sæl -
> breitingu eflir og elur með sér,
> eilíf framför því breitingin er -
> hopar villa á hæl.
>
> (Úrvalsrit, pp.37-38)

Magnús believed unequivocally that everything is conditioned by change, that sadness and happiness alternate in life but that progress is nevertheless inevitable in the long run. In his articles he was often severely critical of contemporary society particularly of educational provisions; but he stressed that progress, though gradual, was already happening in Iceland.

The best example of the gradual move away from the past towards the future as a prime impulse in nationalism is to be found in the poetry of Matthías Jochumsson and Steimgrímur Thorsteinsson. They embraced the view that

historical processes will inevitably create a better life for humanity. As knowledge grows man improves his environment and lives a more civilised and cultured life generally. Such ideas were very much in tune with the idea of a common ancestry and the strife for unity in nationalistic poetry. This notion, which had prevailed among educated Icelanders since the Enlightenment, existed side by side with the Romantic notions about man in communication with "free" nature. There were several factors which contributed to a new emphasis on the future in nationalistic poetry. First the poetry of Jónas Hallgrímsson and Bjarni Thorarensen had established a nationalistic idiom in poetry. By the mid-century little could be added to their conviction that Iceland was beautiful and spiritually significant and the past magnificent. Secondly, the political nationalism propounded by Jón Sigurðsson after the forties was essentially concerned with progress in the present and the near future. The "exiled" poets in Copenhagen contributed to Ný félagsrit, and were influenced by Jón's forceful personality and ideas. There were exceptions to this trend: for example the poet Grímur Thomsen who had a somewhat pessimistic view of the future, and came increasingly to detest the present. Steingrímur was probably a favourite of Jón Sigurðsson, and in spite of a short-lived disagreement worked consistently to further his cause. Steingrímur's poetry was on the whole concerned with non-political subject-matter and he wrote no

historical narratives or poems about Saga-characters or myths - although he translated works of this nature, namely Tegnér's Axel. His "Iceland-poems" do not employ or adopt ancient metres but are generally lyrical; and some like "Vorhvöt", were clearly intended to become popular songs. Thus his work is subtly rather than overtly didactic, demonstrated particularly in the rousing quality of the poems; the rendering of a message with energy of rhythm and imagery which highlights the intention to awaken the people from apathy:

> En bót er oss heitið, ef bilar ei dáð,
> Af beisku hið sæta má spretta,
> Af skaða vér nemum hin nýtustu ráð,
> Oss neyðin skal kenna það rétta,
> Og jafnvel úr hlekkjunum sjóða má sverð
> Í sannleiks og frelsisins þjónustu-gerð.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.5)

Steingrímur's few poems which bring in the past - "Ísland", "Sú var tíðin fyrr, þá frelsið reisti" and a few others - do this in the typical style of the "exiled" poet, making the nation aware that a struggle for independence was necessary and needed active involvement. The poems depend primarily on effective imagery and portray the Golden Age in the usual manner, praising heroic deeds, freedom, courage and renown. It is regretted that a nation with such a past should have fallen into insignificance during the "six hundred summers" of inactivity, misery and oppression:

> Margar aldir varstu möru troðin,
> Myrkra hrollur skóp þér napran blund,
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.3)

This presentation of the past is predictable and adds nothing to Jónas's "Ísland"; there is, however, a new immediacy about the future:

> Höfgum stírum falst þér röðulroðinn,
> Rís til verka, nú er árdagsstund;
> Fagna degi, fjöll þín morgunn krýnir
> Fælir uglur raddskært hanagal,

(Ljóðmæli, p.3)

A similar sense of change and the imminence of a new beginning was still present in "Vorhvöt", written over a decade later and published in Ný félagsrit in 1870. It was written in the mood created by the debate on a new constitution which was revived in 1867. The political overtone of the poem is uncharacteristic of Steingrímur's work as a whole; but more significant is the note of weariness with the Golden Age as a feature in nationalism and reconstruction:

> Vér grátum hið liðna, en grátum sem stytzt
> Svo grætum ei komandi tíma,
> Ei sturlun oss gefur þá stund, sem er mist,
> En störfum fyrst liðin er gríma,
> Því feðranna dáðleysi er barnanna böl
> Og bölvun í nútíð er fámtíðar kvöl.

(Ljóðmæli, p.5)

Here is a feeling that change has already taken place and a new era begun. In 1874 Steingrímur appropriately attempts a synthesis of the two strands, the past and the future, symbolised by two swans singing as they wait for the dawn to break:

> Annar um minning frá hetjulífs heim,
> Hinn um vonina blíða;

(Ljóðmæli, p.13)

Matthías Jochumsson expressed a more ambivalent view of history. A prolific writer who had more than sixty years of creative writing, Matthías wrote intermittently about the past, notably about characters in the Sagas and more recent historical figures such as the last Catholic bishop Jón Arason (1484-1550) and the Protestant hymn writer, Hallgrímur Péturssón (1614-74) who he adored with equal passion. A love and admiration of the past is conveyed in his poetry, and many of his "Iceland-poems", written mostly around 1874, treat the Golden Age in the time-honoured fashion of Jónas Hallgrímsson. Yet Matthías was above all a man of the present and the future. A firm believer in progress through democratic education, Matthías frequently attacked the conservativism and narrowness among high and low in Icelandic society. He was of a liberal rather than radical bent, but extraordinarily open to new ideas, a characteristic reinforced by his many journeys abroad. Matthías believed that things were changing in Iceland during the latter half of the century, but all too slowly. Unlike Benedikt Gröndal who believed that general education would change societies for the better but saw nothing to admire in new-fangled ideas or technological innovations, Matthías was invariably on the side of progress. Thus in 1874 he clearly felt torn between a desire for a new future, made possible by education and material advances, and on the other the appeal of the Golden Age. In "Tímamót" he sees a perpetual harking back to the past as a stranglehold on

new ideas:

> Hvað kennir horfin öld
> heimskunnar skugga-tjöld
> eltandi sannleikans sólu,
> meir vinnur menntuð hönd
> mánuð, en vorri strönd
> eymdanna þúsund ár ólu.

(Ljóðmæli, p.8)

Yet he wrote many poems about the Settlement which echo Jónas's image of the ancient glory lighting up the future:

> Ó land-námsöld, þú lands míns bernsku-tíð,
> þú ljómar eins og himinsólin fríð,

(Ljóðmæli, p.46)

On the whole, however, the millennium was a time when Matthías felt the need to shake the nation by appealing to the future and to progress, rather than simply to a sense of nationality and a pride in ancestry:

> Upp, upp, þú Íslands þjóð -
> unglingur, maður, fljóð -
> hætt þú að horfa til baka!

(Ljóðmæli, p.8)

Similarly in "Þjóðhátíðarsöngur" the emphasis is squarely on sweeping away the old in order to begin a new life. Like Steingrímur, Matthías employs rhythm and imagery that reinforce the energy and power he invests in a new beginning:

> En burt með gömul brek!
> Í brjóstið líf og þrek!

(Ljóðmæli, p.6)

The mood of this poetry is very different from the laborious didacticism of the eighteenth-century reformers. Although it is still possible at times to recognise the

tone of the educated leader who knew what was best for his people, the very nature of this poetry is different. Its lyrical quality and the emphasis on hope and expectations rather than on failure and the degradation in the present, reflects not only a desire for unity but also an awareness of democracy. This is poetry written not to admonish and correct morals and behaviour but for a people to sing together. But, although this new tone was reflected in a variety of ways in the poetry of versemakers and farmers, it was still alien to the majority of poets even in 1874. Adopting the same theme, that the people ought not to fossilise in the past, the clergyman Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðson employed a tone of preaching that came so naturally to the educated Icelander when addressing his unschooled countrymen:

> Lýðurinn einblínir á
> þá öld, sem að löngu er horfin.
>
> (Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

The feeling of exhilaration and anticipation of change that is apparent in the "Iceland-poems" of most Danish-educated poets after the mid-century was less prominent in the works of unschooled poets. Some were too acutely aware of the economic problems of the period to be able to embrace unguarded optimism. Moreover, although critical of the present, the majority of these poets had never seen their own times as the period of total decline that way depicted by most of their educated contemporaries - especially in the early "Iceland-poems". Moreover, they

frequently recognised the character of the men of old in their friends and neighbours, using such likeness to compliment local poets or leading farmers in anniversary poems or elegies. Unschooled poets of the period 1830-74 rarely subscribed to Jónas's dictum that the glory of the past remained only in the character of the landscape. There were indeed many poets who like Brynjólfur Oddsson recognised the values and spirit of the Golden Age in their contemporaries:

> Enn á frægu feðraláði
> fornar eru sýndar dáðir,
> og í brjóstum bragna hugur
> býr og hetju dugur. 7

It is possible that Brynjólfur was in fact thinking of Jón Sigurðsson, to whom he wrote numerous poetic tributes. Certainly, after the mid-century several unschooled poets did refer to those who opposed the government as <u>bjóðfrelsismenn</u> or even <u>bjóðfrelsishetjur</u>; terms also used about the men of the Golden Age.

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7 <u>Nokkur ljóðmæli</u> (Reykjavík, 1869), p.37.

PART THREE

GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

CHAPTER 7

Political Participation

Like most Europeans, the Icelanders felt the impact of the French revolutions of the nineteenth century. The Revolution of 1830 stirred a latent nationalism in Schleswig-Holstein which indirectly led to the re-establishment of the Alþing. The Revolution of 1848 contributed to the demise of the absolute monarchy in Denmark which opened up the question of an Icelandic constitution. Before the thirties there is no evidence in poetry to suggest a general political interest among the Icelanders. But cultural nationalism had emerged, notably in the "Iceland-poems" of Bjarni Thorarensen. Students in "exile" in Copenhagen may well have been influenced by the apparent political passivity of Denmark. This is certainly reinforced in a letter written by Baldvin Einarsson where he claims that Icelandic students "dannast lítið og koma líkir því aftur heim til föðurlandsins sem þeir fóru", and he added that they lack constraint to "hugsa, tala, skrifa eða gera nokkuð sem mætti efla hag föðurlandsins."[1]

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1 Jón Sigurðsson, Blaðagreinar, ed. Sverrir Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1961), I, xxi.

This apparent lack of political interest was undoubtedly related to the absence of governmental institutions in the country. Officials were primarily bureaucrats working in rather difficult circumstances, and accountable to a distant crown. Isolation moreover made popular political activity cumbersome and rendered effective organisations of a social or political nature wellnigh impossible. There were few popular associations of any kind before the thirties, except for small reading societies - the first local reading society being established in 1790.[2]

Educated Icelanders, tied to the Crown through their office, did not take a united stand against policies or openly criticise the government's disinterest in Icelandic problems. Poetry, however, suggests that an undercurrent of opposition and dislike of officialdom was traditional in Iceland. Yet for all his morose dislike of Danish officialdom, the Icelandic farmer failed to develop traditions of opposing authority, or even adopt effective means of expressing his grievances. There was little political activity of any kind during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries other than petitions to the king and complaints against the much hated trade monopoly.

By the eighteen-thirties the Danish government had

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2 Grímur M. Helgason, "Något om de äldsta isländska läseföreningarna", Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och biblioteksväsen, 62-63, 1975-76, 33-35.

become very unpopular among many Icelanders. Not only had it failed to secure regular trade and communications during the Napoleonic Wars, but it had also done nothing to prevent a nominal take-over of the country by the adventurer Jörgen Jörgensen in 1809. Although the trade monopoly had been lifted in 1786, trading remained difficult for the Icelanders partly because they lacked capital, and also because of restrictions on foreign traders - which was repealed in 1854. The first stirrings of political nationalism began to take form among Icelandic students in Copenhagen during the late twenties and early thirties. The most important figure in this nascent political movement was Baldvin Einarsson (1801-33), a student of law and editor of Ármann á alþingi. Baldvin's ideas were in many ways characteristic of the Enlightenment. His interests were both practical and intellectual, including philosophy, education, politics, agriculture and farm management. He wrote on a variety of subjects where he adopted a mildly paternalistic tone which was, however, less overtly didactic than that of the previous generation. Baldvin responded enthusiastically to the Royal Proclamation of 1831 - partly a reaction to Uwe Jens Lornesen's pamphlet of 1830, Über das Verfassungswerk in Schleswig-Holstein - which aimed to nip in the bud the unrest in the Duchies. It is revealing that government officials in Iceland reacted rather differently to the Proclamation's promise of consultative assemblies in all Danish territories. A majority was in favour of reviving the Alþing at

Þingvellir, which in 1800 had become a law court in Reykjavík. Yet for some, for example Bjarni Thorarensen, this reflected Romantic attachment to historical precedent rather than liberalism. It appears that many officials were somewhat apathetic about the issue and that others - notably Bjarni Thorsteinsson (1781-1876) who was probably the most influential Icelandic official at the time - were firmly opposed.[3] It is possible that a revival of the Alþing appealed to Danish Romantics and moreover to the king himself. The king, in spite of his earlier enthusiasm for Þingvellir, acceded to the rather negative response from the high ranking officials in Iceland by appointing two Icelandic representatives to sit in the diet at Roskilde.

The political issues surrounding the introduction of consultative assemblies divided the opinions of educated Icelanders along generation lines. Many of the older officials feared that political change would introduce liberalism and endanger Icelandic society. Magnús Stephensen at various times conveyed the great fear of democracy which prevailed among many of his educated contemporaries. In 1831 he vented his outrage in a letter to Finnur Magnússon that youngsters just out of school - Baldvin Einarsson was then thirty years of age -

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3 Nanna Ólafsdóttir, Baldvin Einarsson og þjóðmálastarf hans (Reykjavík, 1961), pp.124-37.

acted as if they were chosen before their time to give opinions on important issues, "án kóngs köllunar, rjett af sjálfsdáðum."[4] A year later Magnús observed in another letter to Finnur that he agreed with Baldvin on the impossibility of accepting that Iceland be represented in a diet in Denmark. Yet he implored Finnur to do everything possible to prevent the revival of a parliament or any form of representative assembly in Iceland. This, he argued, would revert back to the custom of the ancient Alþing and "ganga mundi mest á skömmum og fylliríi, en ekkert gott afleiða."[5] There are numerous similar comments preserved from the period which show the strong feelings against the first unsure steps towards democracy and self-determination in Iceland, mainly among high ranking officials. Sometimes these comments also reveal what they regarded as the characteristics needed for an ideal crown official. Discussing the sudden and tragic death of Baldvin in 1833, Bjarni Thorsteinsson revealed not only how much he disliked what Baldvin had tried to achieve, but also how he regarded the function of the Icelandic official:

> Söknuður er líka stór ad Baldvini (eins og Rask) því efalaust er, ad hann var gáfadur framúskarandi vel og ydinn ... varla held eg samt hann hefdi ordid heppinn embættismadur; því mikid meira enn lærdómur, lidugt stýlsfæri og annad þesskonar útheimtist þartil. 6

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4 Magnús Stephensen, Bréf til Finns Magnússonar, Safn fræðafélagsins, IV (Copenhagen, 1924), 98.

5 Ibid., p.105.

6 Baldvin Einarsson, pp.32-33.

In contrast to the few poems written in response to the debate about the consultative assemblies, the political events of the mid-century captured the imagination of many Icelandic poets. It is possible that the silence in the thirties was partly due to a lack of information rather than apathy - even some of those who were aware of the debate had only vague notions about the issues it raised.[7] Before Ný félagsrit appeared in 1841, there was little attempt to introduce specific political issues to the population or to explain the general significance of these in even moderately impartial terms. With the exception of Fjölnir, periodicals tended to express a strong bias for the government or remain neutral. That there was limited interest in the subject, however, is supported by several comments from the period. Tómas Sæmundsson observed shortly after he returned to Iceland in 1834 that "Ekkert talast um alþingi hér til lands."[8] Yet the poetry of unschooled poets suggests not so much apathy, as ingrained fatalism and an unquestioning acceptance of social hierarchy which apparently prevented even a desire for political involvement. In view of the attitudes that prevailed among the great majority of Icelandic officials towards the most tentative suggestion of increased participation

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7 Not all of the amtmenn asked by the government to seek the opinions of their subordinates, the sýslumenn, carried out this request. See Baldvin Einarsson, pp.112-115.

8 Tómas Sæmundsson, Bréf, ed. Jón Helgasson (Reykjavík, 1947), p.129.

in government, it is perhaps not surprising that in such matters most unschooled poets placed their faith in God rather than man.

In the early thirties two distinct political views became polarised in Iceland. On the one hand there was a move towards liberalism, represented almost exclusively by Baldvin Einarsson's writing and supported by younger educated men, especially students in Copenhagen; and on the other hand there existed a conservative reaction to any suggestion of change away from absolutism. Most people, who expressed a political view sided with one or the other faction, but as yet personalities were perhaps as important as ideas. Baldvin's liberalism, however, appears somewhat pragmatic: although he advocated a strong monarchy in his publications - which were financed by the government - he also emphasised the need for popular participation in government and for a franchise not entirely based on property. It has been argued very convincingly that in view of the strict censorship which prevailed in Denmark when Baldvin was writing his pamphlets, some of his stress on the efficacy of monarchial rule must be seen as expediency rather than conviction. It is certainly true that sometimes his private correspondence was extraordinarily liberal for an Icelander at this time. In August 1830, for example, he wrote to Grímur Jónsson about the Revolution in France of 1830: "Denne Revolution er saaledes den mærkværdigste i vor Tidsalder ... Den

lavest Deel of Borgerene i Paris tilkjæmpede sig uden Opfordring uden Anförsel den skiönneste Seier."[9]

Although Bjarni Thorsteinsson was perhaps more conservative than many of his fellow officials in the early thirties, his response to the idea that government should be opened up to people outside the royal bureaucracy was characteristic of his colleagues. His fear of even a nominal change towards the direction of democracy was reflected in the writings of such very different men as Bjarni Thorarensen and Magnús Stephensen. The faith in the efficacy, not to say naturalness, of a paternalistic social hierarchy was the essence of the Icelandic Enlightenment which came to a close only in the eighteen-thirties. This view was reflected in numerous poems in the nineteenth century stimulated not only by Eggert Ólafsson's Kvæði, but also by notions about society which dominated the thinking of educated men born before the turn of the eighteenth century.

In 1832, the sýslumaður, historian and poet, Jón Espólín wrote an aldarháttur which reflects the reaction against political change rather well. Although the poem is dedicated to Hallgrímur Péturssón, the seventeenth-century hymn-writer who wrote one of the best known poems in this genre, it conveys attitudes to society that are

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9 Baldvin Einarsson, p.108.

almost identical to those of Eggert Ólafsson. There is no direct reference to the Royal Proclamation of the previous year; but, as the poet enumerates the shortcomings of contemporary society, it is clear that he regards sjálfræði as one of the gravest dangers facing Icelandic society. The lower orders, he argues refuse to obey their superiors and suffer from a widespread disease which he calls sjálfræðis frekju æði. Jón even uses the term jafnaðarmenn - which was very unusual at this time - in a derogatory sense, and with the utmost scorn makes the peculiar claim that "til þvílíkra svokallaðra assistenta gefa sig stúdentar í Guðfræði, ríkir bændur frá búum sínum, landhlauparar og þiófar, og giörast þar allir jafnaðarmenn" (Lbs. 1460, 4to.). Harsh criticism is directed against those, especially from among the lower orders, who attempt to disrupt the stability of the social hierarchy through either displaying a lack of deference or by going too quickly up the social ladder:

> Höfðingianna synir að sönnu
> sækja fræði og lærdómsgæði
> enn yfir sió, og aðrir frægir
> sem eru af stéttum lægra settum,
> enn ef baldrar auðs til veldis
> uppkomast í nockrum hasti,
> drjúgt innleiða danska siðu
> er drengium skialdann komu að haldi.
>
> (Lbs. 1460, 4to.)

It is impossible to speculate who Jón had in mind in this rather unusual reference to educated men of inferior stock, and it can only be mentioned in passing that Baldvin Einarsson's father had begun his working life as a farmhand achieving relative prosperity late in life.

In his aldarháttur, Espólín expresses ideas about government that were widely accepted by Icelandic poets, both educated and unschooled. Few, however, presented their opinions with the same force and conviction. Another aldarháttur written by Jón Hákonarson (ca.1770-1830), a farmer of very insignificant means and social position, shows the strength of a hierarchical society and reflects very well the influence of the Icelandic Enlightenment on well-read farmers. Written in 1833, the poem shows that Jón had in all likelihood read Eggert Ólafsson's Kvæði, published in the previous year, or was familiar with his poems perhaps from manuscripts. Not only are the political and social ideals in the poem very much in the spirit of Eggert's Kvæði, but the theme and structure of the poem - a conversation between the poet and ghosts of some well known Saga characters - resembles Eggert's "Mánamál" very closely. Jón describes the composition of government in Iceland in remarkable detail showing the ladder of appointed officials from the hreppstjóri up to the king himself, a benevolent ruler with complete authority. The poem is not simply a blind adulation of the system but poses some careful, shrewd questions. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Jón's criticisms are above all directed at individuals who fail to carry out their appointed duty in the social hierarchy. He argues that a system of enlightened order has greatly improved Icelandic society, primarily through instruction and knowledge, a pre-condition for progress Eggert himself

stressed. Jón, however, ends by appealing to the final and traditional power, the Almighty whose grace made social inequality less unacceptable to the Icelandic versemaker:

> ..... almúgi trúir,
> líka flestir lærðir oss kenna,
> að þeir betri eylífa sælu
> fái á himni en hinir kvalir.
>
> (Lbs. 2132, 4to.)

The final message also highlights the importance of religious faith and a godly life to Jón's generation:

> Ættir stórar, afl og kunnátta,
> fríðleikur, auður, fagur búningur,
> metorð, heiður, mælska, klókindi
> dugar ekkert ef digð ey filgir.
>
> (Lbs. 2132, 4to.)

The poem demonstrates not only an acceptance of social hierarchy, but also the unschooled poet's traditional attempt to highlight spiritual equality. The first quarter of the century was not a period of silent acceptance of poverty and social conditions, but such protest as there was can hardly be described as political.

Among the older generation of officials, many mistook the new political consciousness among students as a radical challenge to the establishment - or even as republican sentiments, as Magnús Stephensen suggested in a letter to Finnur Magnússon in 1830.[10] Yet the political debate of the thirties was strictly limited to the establishment of a consultative assembly and there is no evidence to suggest

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10 Bréf, p.98.

that the nascent government opposition had in mind anything more than a moderate liberalisation of the existing system. In the forties, however, a marked change in attitudes to political participation became apparent. By this time cultural nationalism had gained a firm ground among educated Icelanders. Nationalistic notions were expressed in the "new" poetry of such as Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrímsson, in Fjölnir and Ný félagsrit. The government's decision to revive the Alþing - which sat for the first time in 1845 - was no doubt also a very important focus for national sentiments. Furthermore, the political activity of Jón Sigurðsson was a turning point which introduced new standards of clarity and consistency to the political debate. The forties also saw Reykjavík acquire some of the characteristics of a capital. New institutions, notably the theological college and the Alþing, were established; the grammar school moved to the town as did the printing press; in 1848 the Icelanders got a liberal newspaper and in the same year elected their first town council. These changes were a necessary foundation for the transfer of the political opposition from the students and expatriates in Copenhagen to Iceland. Although this transfer was gradual it gave greater immediacy to political issues.

The forties were in fact less important for what was achieved by nationalists in political concessions from the government, than for the change which occurred in attitudes.

By the end of the forties it is quite clear that most of the younger educated Icelanders considered that they were taking part in a political struggle against the Danish government. There were, however, factions within the movement, ranging from the conservatism and gradualist approach of the older officials to the liberalism of Jón Sigurðsson and his followers. The main emphasis was on achieving greater self-determination or, among those who held strong opinions, a complete independence from the Danish government - republicanism was not advocated by Icelandic nationalists until the twentieth century. The main disagreements centred on how to approach the government, how far to go and how quickly, rather than on the kind of political system the Icelanders were to adopt when independence was realised. The period from the forties to the seventies was in fact lacking in principled political ideas, a situation reflected very forcefully in the poetry of the þjóðskáld - all of whom were, after a fashion, active in politics. They produced a wealth of nationalistic poetry but displayed on the whole no consistent committment to defined political ideology. Their prime motivation appears most frequently as a passionate involvement in an imaginary or an impending nationalistic struggle.

Jónas Hallgrímsson wrote what is probably the first genuinely political poem of the nationalist era in Iceland. Written in 1841, "Alþing hið nýja" is his only overtly

political poem and came in the wake of several important nationalistic verses including his monumental "Ísland", written to launch Fjölnir in 1835. In these earlier works, Jónas introduced the word frelsi to the nationalistic vocabulary of literature but the tone, although not exactly paternalistic, was still reminiscent of a teacher or leader, albeit more subtle than anything written by the previous generation. "Alþing hið nýja" is unusual among Jónas's nationalistic poetry in that it makes hardly any appeal to nature or the Golden Age. It is undoubtedly the most successful nationalistic poem written in the period, and is unique moreover for presenting a political view without a direct appeal to a love of country. Written to celebrate Christian VIII's recommendation in 1841 that a consultative assembly be revived in Iceland at the ancient site of the Alþing, the poem opens by drawing attention to the ordinary people destined to spend their lives in hard labour:

> Hörðum höndum
> vinnur hölda kind
> ár og eindaga;
> siglir særokinn,
> sólbitinn slær,
> stjörnuskininn stritar.
>
> (Rit, I, 79)

The foundation of society must be strong, "Traustir skulu hornsteinar/ hárra sala; / í kili skal kjörviður." Having shown that the mass of people are the pivot on which society turns, Jónas goes on to demonstrate that great leaders can achieve nothing without a mature following:

Fríður foringi
stýri fræknu liði,
þá fylgir sverði sigur;
illu heilli
fer að orustu
sá, er ræður heimskum her.

(Rit, I, 80)

The individual can achieve nothing by his own efforts; strength and wealth cannot overcome great obstacles:

Sterkur fór um veg,
þá var steini þungum
lokuð leið fyrir;
ráð-at hann kunni,
þótt ríkur sé,
og hefðu þrír um þokað.

(Rit, I, 80)

The first part of the poem propounds the theme, that society needs a concerted effort and co-operation to function successfully. The message is presented by a series of aphorisms leading up to the finale:

Bera býr
bagga skoplítinn
hvert að húsi heim;
en þaðan koma ljós
hin logaskæru
á altari hins göfga guðs.

(Rit, I, 80)

The scene is now set for the particular event the poem is celebrating but the message has already been stated: the individual's contribution to society is always paltry but united humanity can achieve great things. Jónas's final allusion to God is significant and suggests - as do the first five stanzas as a whole - that he is concerned with general truths about man rather than simply Icelandic nationalism. This gives the poem an added strength of

conviction.

The second part introduces Christian VIII, who by his decision shows an awareness of the importance of the theme already stated. Thus the king relinquishes his absolute power:

> Frelsi vil eg sæma
> framgjarnan lýð,
> ættstóran kynstaf
> Ísafoldar

(Rit, I, 80)

It is clear that Jónas interprets the king's recommendation somewhat optimistically - the absolute monarchy had still nearly a decade to run. But for Jónas the revival of the Alþing was always the keystone supporting future progress. Thus in the poem it is not simply symbolic of the Golden Age but becomes the centre of government and of cultural activity in Iceland:

> Ríða skulu rekkar,
> ráðum land byggja,
> fólkdjarfir fyrðar
> til fundar sækja,
> snarorðir snillingar
> að stefnu sitja,
> þjóðkjörin prúðmenni
> þingsteinum á.

(Rit, I, 80-81)

The new Alþing promised by the king is not simply to be an advisory council with appointed members but a parliament organised by the Icelanders themselves:

> Svo skal hinu unga
> alþingi skipað
> sem að sjálfir þeir
> sér munu kjósa.

(Rit, I, 81)

It is now up to the people to use the gift of freedom so generously offered by their king:

> Vaki vaskir menn!
> til vinnu kveður
> giftusamur konungur
> góða þegna.
>
> (Rit, I, 81)

No other poet of the period produced such a lucid and well supported case for self-determination and democracy. Even by the mid-century when the Icelanders were suddenly faced with the void brought about by the dissolution of absolutism in Denmark, the þjóðskáld did not take a similarly defined political stance. Their nationalistic poems were primarily ættjarðarljóð, or more specifically "Iceland-poems", which had some political overtones and implications but rarely - like "Alþing hið nýja" - presented principled political ideas. The most notable exception to this can be found in the works of Gísli Brynjúlfsson, who presented the case for national freedom in terms of a more or less consistent socialist viewpoint. Gísli, however, argued the case for the association of national and social freedom by detailed reference to the cases of Hungary, France and Ireland rather than Iceland. Perhaps because he felt that the Icelanders had never experienced real oppression, and perhaps also because the struggles elsewhere in Europe were more satisfying to his romantic nature, his "Iceland-poems" tend to concentrate on nature, history and an emotional bond with the motherland. By this

time such features were irretrivably associated with nationalism in Icelandic poetry.

The most political aspect of the poetry of the educated was perhaps their stress on national unity and on the importance of national consciousness. The message that the people must awake from slumber and apathy - highlighted by frequent use of words like vakna and rís - was rarely followed by solutions of contemporary problems in Iceland or even by a promise of increased prosperity or greater equality. It is perhaps not surprising that poets were vague in this respect, since only a handful of men, even among the educated élite, looked beyond the struggle with Denmark. Nevertheless, many of the "Iceland-poems", for all their appeal to stirring metaphors and analogies, had a direct political message. This is reflected very well in Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's "Vorhvöt" inspired by the debate about the constitution in 1867. The poet, by using the metaphor of a breaking of chains, implicitly draws the reader's attention beyond independence to the freedom of people:

> Og jafnvel úr hlekkjunum sjóða má sverð
> í sannleiks og frelsisins þjónustugerð.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.5)

In 1874 Steingrímur employed the same metaphor - this time discussing more specifically change within Icelandic society:

Guð styrki hvern frækinn og frjálsan mann,
Sem framför sannasta þekkir,
Sem landslýðinn bætir og berst fyrir hann,
Unz bresta þeir síðustu hlekkir,
Svo náum vér fornaldar helguðu hrósi
Í himnesku frelsis og sannleiks ljósi.

(Ljóðmæli, p.15)

Like most educated Icelanders in the period, Steingrímur tends to adopt a fatherly tone in his nationalistic and "awakening" poetry. The reference to free and courageous men who know what true progress involves hardly suggests that the poet contemplated the possibility of change from below. Nevertheless, he sees the success of nationalism in terms of some kind of levelling. The key to this lies in the way chains do not symbolise Danish oppression but blind ignorance and mental stagnation which are contrasted to the light of truth and freedom.

The idea that progress involved a united but also an informed population was also a central feature of Jón Sigurðsson's nationalism. His ideas were firmly within nineteenth-century European liberalism: a change in the direction of a progressive and just society for all must initially come from the educated. But once the ignorant, who were not beyond reclaim, had acquired the necessary tools to operate society, albeit within the framework outlined by their betters, their destiny was in their own hands. In 1856 Jón reflected this view very clearly in a letter to his namesake, Jón Jónsson Borgfirðingur, a "folk scholar" who for a number of years searched out manuscripts and books for the Bókmenntafélag. The tone

of the letter demonstrates the unbelievable patience and consistency of Jón Sigurðsson's relentless attempts to influence the attitudes of his countrymen - and of course an attempt to sell his periodical:

> Réttindi vor getum við unnið ef vér fylgjum samhuga því máli ... það sem samheldið þarf að lýsa sér í, það er fyrst og fremst í því að lesa hvað ritað er í góða stefnu, og styrkja svo þau rit, að þau sé í hverju húsi, ... menn eiga ekki að bíða embættismanna, heldur á alþýða þar sjálf að velja forstöðumenn úr sínum flokki ... þá verða allir Íslendingar sem einn maður, að minnsta kosti alþýðan, og þá getur engin stjórn neitað þeim um það sem þeir beiðast um með alhuga. 11

A faith in education as a means by which man could improve himself was as important to educated nationalists as it was to the men of the Enlightenment.[12] The major difference was that the former tended to believe unequivocally in meritocracy. Through education, most of them argued, everyone could become a political citizen. To some extent this view - and the fact that many educated Icelanders were not men of property - may explain why, from Baldvin Einarsson to the end of the period, the majority of educated and politically concerned nationalists opposed a franchise based exclusively on property. As early as 1844 an article about the Alþing in Fjölnir,

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11 Menn og minjar, I, 95-6.

12 A faith in education is an important refrain in the nationalistic poetry of the period e.g. "Vísindin efla alla dáð" (Jónas); "fyrir andans framför eina, fólksins rödd er sterk" (Steingrímur); "Alvæpni andans/það hið sterka" (Gröndal). Similar ideas can be found in the work of unschooled poets.

suggested that everyone except criminals and the mentally incapable ought to have the vote. Although the article argues that poverty often causes ignorance and sometimes moral depravity, it accedes it to be a complete injustice that a poor man could be addressed thus: "þú hlýtur að vera bæði vankunnandi og siðlaus af því að þú ert fátækur."[13]

Thus the nationalistic poetry of educated poets was on the whole implicitly rather than expressly political and rarely offered any indication of the specific colour of a future national government. Jónas's "Alþing hið nýja" was arguably the most outspoken plea for democracy made by an educated poet. The "Iceland-poems" and similar works by the unschooled poets reflect a strong influence by the "new" poetry of the literary élite but at the same time an adherence to traditional forms and a persistent tendency to write long laborious poems. Mostly written after the mid-century - particularly in the late sixties and seventies - this poetry reflects a radical change in attitudes to politics. This is not demonstrated primarily in the ideas put forward but in the evidence that unschooled poets were indirectly participating in politics - the struggle for independence above all. Of course the unschooled poet was no newcomer to polemics. He had taken part in the onslaught on Magnús Stephensen's publication of a new hymn

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13 Fjölnir, VII 1844, 120.

book at the turn of the century, the acrimony with Fjölnir because of Jónas's criticism of the rímur and so on. For the most part these were not political issues and moreover had in common a personal attack because of private grievances.

Although there were no local political movements in the period and few opportunities to express dissent openly to either the Danish government or Icelandic politicians, poetry demonstrates that strong views existed on a variety of national issues. In the few poems which can be described as voicing political opposition or clearly thought out criticism, nationalism appears to be the most common motivating force. A theme which crops up in several poems after the mid-century is the ineffectiveness of the Alþing as a representation of the ordinary Icelander, especially the farmer. It is significant that these ideas were not voiced primarily by well-off farmers but by someone like Níels Jónsson (1782-1857), "folk scholar", healer and small-scale crofter, and the farmer's son and bookbinder Friðrik Guðmundsson (1837-99). Friðrik wrote several poems deriding the "Danish-Icelanders", the embættismenn and þjóðníðingar in Reykjavík who despised country rustics. In a poem called "Einn veraldlegur sálmur" - probably written in the late fifties - he also makes a scathing attack on members of parliament. Friðrik argues that if the Alþing does not grace the country with bændaráð - i.e. give political voice to farmers - it does

not serve the people and thus is a parasite on the rest of society:

> Nema það styrki og styðji að
> stjórnarbót hjer á landi,
> því átumein er annara það
> og úlfur blóðsjúgandi;
> nenni það ei að ljá oss lið.
>
> (Íb. 979, 8vo.)

The poem appears not to question the Alþing's power to achieve political reforms, or, indeed that the members do very little to produce improvement in this respect.

Characteristically Níels presented a more detailed case against the government and is critical of both Danish rule and Iceland's own politicians. "Mittisband 19. aldar" is a remarkable, albeit rather an artless and lengthy poem, which analyses the political situation in 1850 with unusual clarity and strength of conviction. It is spoken by an old farmer who, after a lifetime of hard labour and poverty, faces the prospect of giving up his farm and relying on charity. Far from being melodramatic the poem describes a situation faced by many small-scale crofters - Níels could have been telling the life-story of Hjálmar Jónsson. Although the poem begins by outlining problems of particular importance to farmers - high rents, ineffective laws and the lack of interest in their problems by those who "stýra þjóðeignunum", it soon turns to the most pressing problems in Icelandic politics at the time - the proposals for a new constitution. Looking briefly back to the revival of the Alþing, Níels sees this event as a turning

point in Icelandic politics:

> Nú varð Alþing aftur stofnað,
> allt þegar var að mestu sofnað.
> Breytingar hér byrjast klíð.
>
> (Menn og minjar V, 43)

For Níels the new Alþing depends mainly on petitions and contrasts rather unfavourably with the Parliament of old. Petitions, the old farmer argues, are not worth the paper they are written on, and can moreover be counter-productive:

> Þjóðin áður alls ráðandi
> inn í sínu fósturlandi,
> byrjaði nú með bænaskrám,
> en reyndi brátt þær örfátt unnu,
> ei að síður gilda kunnu
> frekara tjón og fjár uppnám.
>
> (Menn og minjar V, 43)

The new Alþing is not an institution working for the Icelanders in spite of the fact, Níels admits, that many of its members were trying hard to achieve improvements in the conditions in the country: "því einu, sem Danir vildu, / fékk svo þingið fram komið". The main problem, he suggests, is that the Icelandic élite does not understand the actual problems of Icelandic farmers. They accuse the farmer of improvidence when in fact he is burdened by high rents and unrealistic taxes and by intolerable oppression at the hands of Danish merchants. Secondly he maintains that the nationalists in the Alþing are not realistic enough in their estimation of the opposition: "Fleiri ræða en frelsis vinir,/ fyrir sér kunna nokkuð hinir, / svo brögðum megið búast við." Níels in fact is warning against too emphatic an optimism towards the new constitional proposals, "gætið þið þess við stjórnarskrána/ að hún myndist einhöfðuð".

Níels concludes that nationalistic politicians are extraordinarily naïve to imagine that co-operation among farmers in their localities will have any effect on Iceland's problems. While under Danish rule, where feudal attitudes are ingrained, the Icelanders cannot hope to gain freedom:

> Samtök heyri eg suma nefna,
> en sýnist fánýt hugarstefna,
> krömurum mót með brugguð brögð.
> Höndlan dönsk ei hyggjum lagist
> hana þó landið allt við jagist,
> áður mundi hún eyðilögð.
>
> Svo það talsverð hagbót héti
> haldið þið bræður Danir geti
> skipt við okkur skár en er.
> Þegar þeir kúgun sömu sæta,
> sama frelsis banni mæta
> og afarkostum eins og vér.
>
> (Menn og minjar V, 50-51)

Undoubtedly the most unusual point made in the poem is the notion that the Danish people were as badly served by their government as the Icelanders. Such a conclusion is in tune with Níels's general attitudes. In his comments on literature he expressed a dislike of occasional poetry which by its nature reflected immediate responses, or at its worst, is hypocritical. In this poem there is an obvious attempt to draw conclusions, to get at the root of the problems in Icelandic government. Clearly Níels supports Jón Sigurðsson, for example in the reference to his historical theory that with the dissolution of the absolute monarchy the Icelanders' relationship with Denmark reverted back to the Covenant of 1262:

Að Dana kóngur yfir oss erfði,
aldrei trúum sannað verði,
neitt það vald ei hafði hinn.

(Menn og minjar V, 50)

Níels is, however, very critical of the gradualism of the Alþing, their lack of interest in the population as a whole and their tendency to accept Danish and pro-Danish opinions. This arises partly from his apparent lack of deference to his betters - something quite rare among Níels's generation of unschooled poets - whom he admonished with great ease. Moreover, unschooled poets usually expressed a much stronger dislike of the Danes in Iceland than their educated counterparts. What is really significant in the poem is its notion that the Icelanders are a nation, not simply culturally but socially. Níels uses - and obviously coins himself - a number of concepts with collectivist connotations e.g. landsins fjárhagur þjóðeignir, hagir þjóðar, þjóðviljinn, þjóðfeitingjar and samkúgun. To this extent, Níels's writing is very much within the new idiom of nationalism. On the other hand he clearly felt uneasy about the secular tone of the new age and concludes the poem by a tentative attack on modern theological notions, undermining the power of humble prayer. Although it would be unfair to suggest that this was his political solution - which depends primarily on the cumulative effect of the collectivist and democratic ideas and imagery of the poem - he does end by stressing the efficacy of the grace of God.

Although few poets wrote with equal consistency about the events of 1849-51 - the constitutional proposals and eventual defeat - many unschooled poets contributed to the debate. Their poems can be divided broadly into two main categories: firstly, poems and songs written to celebrate meetings all over the country and especially at Þingvellir. These were written exclusively to support the cause of the frelsishetjur, including Jón Sigurðsson. With the exception of Hjálmar Jónsson's "Þjóðfundarsöngur" - a plea for the amelioration of Iceland's poverty - such poetry was often influenced by the "new" style employing imagery from nature and bringing in the Golden Age. Secondly, satirical and humorous poems of different kinds, usually lampooning the main actors, especially the villains of the drama, i.e. Trampe, Páll Melsteð or the Danish navy. Political satire did in fact become a popular genre in the latter half of the century, to which both the educated and the unschooled contributed. All of these poems are nationalistic and demonstrate displeasure at the treatment of the Icelanders. Perhaps the most humorous, and at the same time most critical, is Brynjólfur Oddsson's Dátaríma. In two hundred and nine stanzas Brynjólfur narrates the episode from the landing of the Danish navy in the summer of 1851 to the departure of the occupying force - twenty-five soldiers who had guarded Arnarhóll, a small hillock in Reykjavík, during the winter. Brynjólfur described these events as if the Icelanders had nearly escaped a revolution. There is no doubt about his loyalty

to the Icelandic cause and that of freedom, in spite of the humorous tone of the poem:

> Þá að hætti harðstjórnar
> hleypti upp þjóðfundinum;
> ljúka störfum leyft ei var
> lands og frelsis vinum.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.54)

Poetry expressing a response to political events became increasingly common during the sixties and seventies, which at the very least reflects an interest in what was happening in politics, particularly when this had a bearing on the relationship with Denmark. But writing poetry can hardly be described as political participation. In his study of Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla, Gunnar Karlsson argues convincingly that there was limited interest in politics until after the eighteen-eighties. Discussing popular associations and co-operation among the inhabitants of Mývatnssveit, he suggests that "Félagsstarf Mývetninga fyrir 1880 snerist mest um almenna framfarasókn, bindindi, menntun, búnaðarframfarir, verslunarumbætur og einfalda dægrastyttingu. Hreyfingin var ákaflega lítið pólitísk og lítið gagnrýnin."[14] This lack of political participation is reflected in the Icelander's use of the vote. In 1874 8.8% had a vote to the Alþing, but only about 20% of these exercised their rights. Although it is possible that problems in connection with travel prevented many people from using the vote, it is worth considering whether

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14 Frelsisbarátta Suður-Þingeyinga (Reykjavík, 1977), p.366.

political participation does not necessitate in the first place a belief that such participation can bear fruit, and in the second place some kind of identification by the individual with the system. Poetry reflecting attitudes to the monarchy and social hierarchy suggests that during the period 1830-74, the Icelanders were experiencing a breakdown in what had been an essentially paternalistic social system. This breakdown inevitably destroyed many people's faith in either the goodwill or the efficiency of the system in providing for its members. It is not perhaps surprising that the growing awareness among unschooled poets of contemporary political issues was primarily motivated by nationalism, the most unifying idea in the period. There is no evidence in the work of the unschooled poets that their ideas of nationality were rigidly associated with political participation.

CHAPTER 8

Nationalism and the Monarchy

In 1874, after six centuries of rule by absentee kings, the Icelanders were for the first time favoured with the presence of a reigning monarch. The event was celebrated by numerous poets. Well known people such as Matthías Jochumsson and Benedikt Gröndal, clergymen and unschooled poets, wrote verses which were recited and printed. The bulk of this poetry not only expresses gratitude for the king's gift of a constitution but also refers to him with unambiguous approval. The fashion of praising the reigning monarch in verse was imported to Iceland in the mid-eighteenth century from Denmark, where such poetry had already become a genre in its own right. The absolute monarchs in effect demanded total loyalty from the country's institutions; in the schools loyalty was demonstrated partly by an open approbation on special occasions. In Copenhagen University professors celebrated the king's birthday, wedding and death in verse.

Bjarni Thorarensen was the only Icelandic poet associated with the Romantic movement to be born in the

eighteenth century and write his most nationalistic poems before 1830. Although he rejected the Enlightenment and criticised most of its representatives in Iceland, Bjarni's attitude to the monarchy in most essentials resembled that of Eggert Ólafsson. He argued that the influence of the movement had weakened the moral fibre of the common people, and particularly condemned its tendency to indulge criminals and servants. To some extent perhaps this prejudice against the rational attitude to reform during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was due to a personal animosity against the people involved, notably Magnús Stephensen. Bjarni was also influenced by the reaction against the movement which dominated Danish literature and even politics, during his stay in Copenhagen from 1802 to 1811. In this period his genuine deference and affection for Frederik VI was strengthened by Denmark's problems - Bjarni helped to defend Copenhagen in 1808 - and a deep loyalty to a king who stood for stability and order in a period of European upheaval.

In many ways Bjarni was standing at a watershed. In Denmark he came under the influence of Romanticism, then almost unknown in Iceland. This ensured the popularity of his poetry among a younger generation of educated men and students who in the thirties were the pioneers of nationalism. But unlike his younger admirers, Bjarni was untouched by the liberal and democratic aspects of the movement. Like Eggert, he believed that paternalism and

hierarchy were the natural order of society; their views differed largely in style and explanation. Eggert argued that divine hierarchy and interdependence was intrinsic to the material world. Búnaðarbálkur, for instance, demonstrates the Scriptural basis of his ideas about social organisation. Here he argues that since God gave man dominion over his creation, the earth and all living things upon it, man had a duty to order his society in such a way that it mirrored the essential character of this world. Although man had been placed in a central position on earth he was an integral part of it. At the heart of Eggert's ideas was a desire to establish an ordered society where everyone knew his place and function in relation to the whole:

> Skoðaðu guðs í verkum veru,
> vill hann ei þína hvörsdags hrygð;
> full af indæli flest þau eru;
> fékk hann þér í þeim miðjum bygð,
> að Adams straff og eymda þján
> æ mýkist fyrir herrans lán.
>
> (Kvæði, p.34)

Although he exalted individuality, Bjarni similarly rejected the idea that man was a free being and, in contrast to later Romantic poets, saw humanity very much as a part of a pre-ordained divine plan. That the individual could only achieve freedom at the end of his journey on earth is a thread running through his poetry, notably in obituaries. In a letter to his friend Grímur Jónsson, Bjarni sums up this aspect of his ideas about man, society and nature: "Frihed lader sig aldrig practisere, den strider mod Naturens egen Analogie hvor den ene Kraft er begrændset ved

den anden."[1]

As a government official, Bjarni was out of tune with the humanitarian tendencies fostered by the enlightened monarchy. A strict authoritarian, Bjarni demanded rigid adherence to laws that many of his older contemporaries observed flexibly. A much more fundamental difference between Bjarni and his eighteenth-century predecessors relates to his notions about Iceland, its nature and future prospects. Interested in progress, especially agricultural improvements - which he tried to put into practice on the farms he occupied - he clearly did not regard this as a topic for poetry. The exception is a poem written to celebrate the founding of the Fjallvegafélag - a society concerned with clearing mountain tracks. Here he stresses the necessity of undertaking practical work to improve Icelandic conditions, but Eggert's optimism is totally lacking:

> Að ryðja snjóvgum björgum burt
> og blómun þekja hraun,
> í flóum gjöra fúnum þurt
> og flaga lækna kaun
> á vetri vond er raun,
> og gras úr urðum getum vér ei skapað.

(Ljóðmæli, I,153)

Not only does the poem reflect Bjarni's deep pessimism, but it also indirectly reveals notions about climatic or geographical determinism which are a central theme in his nationalistic poetry. Icelandic nature, essentially harsh and unyielding, is seen as mysterious, independent of man

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1 Bréf, p.19.

and always beyond his control. Bjarni's ideas about the absolute monarchy and his harsh and unattractive social philosophy were consistent with such a view of nature which owed a great deal to Romanticism. Contrasting the love of monarchy and the Danish kings in the poetry of Bjarni and Eggert, Benedikt Gröndal observed that their attitudes were very similar except that the former saw the king through a haze of romantic and chivalrous glamour.[2] It is indeed remarkable that unlike Eggert, Bjarni perceived the Royal House through the same mysterious hue as he perceived Icelandic nature.

In many ways Bjarni's ideas belonged wholly neither to the past or the present. His attitudes to the law and his social assumptions were very much on the way out by his death in 1841. His genuine love of the Danish monarchy has often surprised later generations - "hartnær ótrúlegt" observed Jón Helgason, in his edition of Bjarni's Ljóðmæli - but it is true to say that most educated men of his age group favoured an absolute monarchy and an ordered hierarchical society, albeit through merit as well as birth. Bjarni's enthusiastic tributes to the king both in poetry and in his extensive correspondence, highlight his political conservatism; and by 1830 it is possible to detect a tone of defence when he refers to the absolute monarchy. This is particularly clear in a letter written to Finnur Magnússon in 1835:

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2 Dægradvöl, p.97.

> Undarlegt er annars hvörnig allir hafa rángt Álit á þeirri kónglegu Stödu (Stilling) hann er sá eini verulegi Folkets Mand - því, umiddelbar gétur hann ei stiórnað heldur gégnum Embættismennina. Allur Stiórnardespotisme er því þeim ad kenna, og þá er þad sem Kóngur á ad vakta. Nú er hann eingvum þeirra vensladur og á ad vera í þeim Luckukríngumstædum ad hann sé uppá eingvann kominn, og hann er þá sá eini sem eingva Freistíng þarf ad hafa til ad giöra neinum órétt. Garantie móti hönum er nóg í Tidsaanden, en eg óttast þegar menn vilja hafa meira en rádgéfandi Stönd (því þau eruæ gód) þá fái hann Freistíngar til ad giöra Indivíder órétt til ad favorisera voldugum Demagoger 3

Bjarni's explicit faith in the effectiveness of absolutism appears extraordinarily naive. The belief that an absolute monarch could isolate his position from that of all his officials was not borne out in Denmark itself. Even in Iceland, which must have seemed fearsome to the Danish nobility, governing posts functioned as a ladder for minor aristocrats. Like the great majority of educated men born before the turn of the century, Bjarni apparently ignored the inevitable political aspects of nationalism and therefore a paradox appeared when he defended his political views. The dichotomy between a strong national consciousness, which Bjarni thought essential, and an absolute government invested in a single person, and a foreigner, was irreconcilable. This is demonstrated in a poem to his favourite king, Frederik VI. Bjarni appeals to God to hand over his power of retribution to the king in order that he may punish evil in the world and sow a seed of peace and order in his state:

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3 Bréf, pp.227-28.

Hvarvetna of land og lög
legg guð þín reiðarslög
honum í hönd.
Eins og þú ofri hann þeim
illum til skelks um heim,
en friði og fögrum seim
frjóvgi sín lönd

(Ljóðmæli, I,89)

Bjarni, like Eggert before him, not only invested the king with divinity but also saw him as an active element and a moral force in the social hierarchy. In Iceland, such a view of the monarchy was utterly irrelevant. Although the king must have occupied an important place in people's imagination as a powerful being who received petitions, and who made rules and regulations which affected their lives, he was never seen and moreover his symbols of power were few. His officials in the country were often disliked, especially when they were Danish and knew neither the language nor the culture.

Although Bjarni's political and social views differed on fundamental issues from those of his younger contemporaries, his royal poems influenced subsequent tributes to the Danish monarchs. This was partly due to the way in which Bjarni always included a description of Icelandic nature in such poetry. In his "Ísland" Eggert Ólafsson had personified Iceland as a woman who tells its own story. Bjarni uses similar devices but often makes nature itself celebrate the royal occasions. This afforded an opportunity to concentrate on Icelandic nature without deviating from the main subject. In 1822 Frederik VI's

birthday coincided approximately with a volcanic eruption in Iceland, which gave Bjarni a golden opportunity to add colour to his royal praises:

> Spyrjir þú svo, því hann hljómi svo hart
> og hósti upp vikri og eldi,
> að mökkur sést eldlitur myrkrið um svart,
> svo miðnættið verður sem hádegið bjart
> og glóir í gull lögðum feldi.
> gjörla eg þori að greina þér, að
> gleðilog og fagnaðarhróp er það.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I, 117)

The poem was criticised for stretching the facts - the eruption had not started on the king's birthday - and few people regarded such an event as a cause for celebration in 1822. It is unlikely however, that the melodramatic quality of Bjarni's royal tributes was a particular embarrassment in a period which often produced verse of similar character, but there is no evidence that they gained popularity although he was already a well-known poet. Yet these poems apparently set a trend and after the mid-century royal tributes were strikingly different from eighteenth-century contributions to the genre. Not only did Bjarni give Icelandic nature equal place beside the king, but he brought the Golden Age to the fore. In a poem celebrating the marriage of the daughter of Frederik VI to the prince who later became Frederik VII, the poet presents a rapturous adulation of the Danish Royal House. But attention is diverted from the pair by an address to nature asking for a due celebration of the event. Moreover, the poet also calls on the ancient Nordic poets in order to complete the

festivities:

> Eyvindur, Sighvatur!
> Arnór, Hallfreður!
> festið á Austfjarða
> fjöllum strengi.
> felið svo enda
> undir Horndröngum
> og Ossians boga
> um þá farið.
>
> (Ljóðmæli. I. 152-53)

In this way the nationalistic poet tended to turn an expression of loyalty to his king into a hymn to his country.

Traditional poetry, especially the rímur, suggests that Icelandic poets preferred writing about kings whose virtues were heroic or extraordinary in some way. Such romantic notions of kingship were not easily adjusted to the Danish absolute monarchs, by any standard a group of rather mediocre, albeit in some cases notorious, men who depended on bureaucracy and paternalism to run the state. Although Eggert, like educated Icelanders before him, tried to propound more mundane social virtues than the traditional poetry, this was not popular among unschooled poets. Bjarni Thorarensen, unlike Eggert, was always attracted to the unusual character in his poetry. He clearly regarded the servant of a monarch differently from those the ancient poet had described as the king's men. This difference is highlighted in a poem written on the wedding-day of Tómas Sæmundsson in 1834:

Kóngsþrælar Íslenzkir aldregi vóru,
enn síður skrílþrælar, lyndi með tvenn,
en ætíð því hé̩ldu þá eiða þeir sóru,
og ágætir þóktu því konungamenn.

(Ljóðmæli, I, 165-66)

Nineteenth-century poets tended to associate royal ancestry and kingly virtues with their medieval forefathers, and praised individualism and courage, rather than conformity to law and society. Those who stood out from the accepted norm in any striking fashion might receive heroic epitaphs. Bjarni quite simply likened the social misfit Oddur Hjaltalín to a king in one of his obituaries:

Konungs hafði hann hjarta
með kotungs efnum,

(Ljóðmæli, I, 191)

It is unlikely that the versemakers were unfamiliar with royal tributes as a genre since such poetry was written specifically for, say, the king's birthday and sometimes printed separately and sold to the public - and apparently could make a profit.[4] Nor is there a reason to doubt that people generally accepted a hierarchical social system headed by a powerful king. Although many versemakers voiced strong criticism of social injustices, they did not blame the king for the system's failure to provide them with a reasonable life and expectations. Nevertheless, it is possible to see implied criticism of the monarchy in their glorification of the Golden Age, when the Icelanders had been free of a single overlord.

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4 Sigurður Pétursson, Ljóðmæli (Reykjavík, 1844), p.271.

Whatever the reasons, unschooled poets rarely wrote specific tributes to the reigning monarch before the eighteen-fifties.

After the publication of Eggert's Kvæði in 1832, several unschooled poets wrote lengthy and often archaic poems in his style. Although these poems are usually historical narratives, they sometimes mention the reigning monarch. Jón Hákonarson's aldarháttur (1833-34) is clearly influenced by Eggert. It is a series of questions asked by the ghosts of ancient Icelanders covering a wide variety of subjects from government to social customs. The poet answers patiently in a voice reminiscent of Eggert:

> Friðrik er Kóngur og kallast hinn sjötti
> af Aldinborgar ættstofn fræga.
>
> Hann er sá 14di filkir þeirra
> er hver eptir annann hásætið prýddi,
> hver öðrum betri hafa þeir verið,
> með náðugum gjöfum þá nauð píndi.
>
> (Lbs. 2132, 4to.)

The poem as a whole conveys an acceptance of paternalism and a loyalty to the king, which are characteristic sentiments among the older generation of poets throughout the period. This is reflected in the poet's emphasis on the king's benevolence as he helps the Icelanders in their difficulties. The ancients are rather more sceptical about the blessings of monarchial rule. Their questions become more pointed: "Hvur á nú Ísland/ hermdu oss vinur" The reply suggests that Jón, himself a farmer, was not

quite as satisfied with the royal government as the previous stanza suggests:

> Kóngur á mikið kirkjur og staði,
> þó eru i bigðum bónda eignir,
> sumstaðar enn er sjálfir á búa.
>
> (Lbs. 2132, 4to.)

When they realise that the king is now a large landowner with control over the Church, the ancients draw the conclusion that farmers must be oppressed and burdened with taxation. Einar Þveræingur is allowed a weighty speech drawing attention to a warning he had given when the Norwegian king began to make overtures to the Commonwealth:

> svo er þá komið er sagði eg forðum
> þá Norvegs Kóngur kveðju oss sendi,
> vingjafir stórar og virti oss mikið.
>
> (Lbs. 2132, 4to.)

Although as a whole the poem outlines the civilising effect of the absolute monarchy, stressing its humanitarian approach to social problems and above all the improvements in law and order since the Commonwealth, there is clearly some doubt represented in the forcefully voiced opinions of the forefathers:

> Því eg vel sá að svo mundi fara,
> ef hilmir leifðist höndum grípa
> um vort frón sig freka mundi,
> svo er þá rætt það ræddi eg forðum.
>
> (Lbs. 3132, 4to.)

Although Jón expresses grave doubts about the government in Iceland and even allows the ancients to question the monarch's interference in Icelandic affairs, he could not envisage a society without hierarchy and paternalism.

Moreover, his criticism of the disorder during the Golden Age reflects his reluctance or inability to envisage society without the stability of easily recognised social hierarchy.

It is possible that unschooled poets had stronger feelings about absolute rule than the bulk of their poetry suggests. Since 1799 there had been strict censorship in the Danish monarchy which certainly affected educated Icelanders such as Baldvin Einarsson.[5] This may have been unknown among the many ordinary men and women in Iceland who wrote poetry that was not even intended for the printing-press; but it could have affected general attitudes. Whatever the reason, those who paid poetic tribute to the longest reigning absolute king of the period, Frederik VI, were nearly all clergymen and crown officials. Sometimes the clergy ended a composition by a blessing such as "Guð blessi kónginn, yfirvöldin, móðurjörð vora og alla oss",[6] the final words in the autobiography of the pastor Björn Hjálmarsson (1769-1853). It may be significant that the king and government were placed before the motherland, something later poets would probably have considered as something of a sacrilege. It is, however, difficult to read anything from these commonplace touches which are to be found most often in

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5 Baldvin Einarsson, pp.109-12.

6 Lbs. 946, 8vo.

poetry celebrating some notable event or the beginning of a new year.

There is indirect evidence in poetry that a strong dislike of the absolute monarchy may have existed among at least a few unschooled Icelanders. Although he was an exception among unschooled poets in that he spent several years abroad, Sigurður Breiðfjörð often echoed common attitudes. It is perhaps surprising that he apparently wrote no tribute to the king - apart from a poem in Danish, "Dagbrækningen", composed in Greenland clearly to celebrate Frederik VI's birthday. The poem may well have been written for the community of Danes who would have commemorated the event in the usual way. There is no mention of Iceland and the fatherland referred to is undoubtedly Denmark:

> Hist svæver höjt det danske Flag
> fra Grönlands ranke Tind,
> det bölger op mod Himlens Tag
> fra Nordens braske Vind
> og hæver Sönners Sind
> med salig Fryd til Fædres grönne Vange.
>
> (Ljóðasafn, III, 120-21)

Breiðfjörð wrote the best part of his Núma rímur in Greenland. The story of the rímur is essentially about a wise and enlightened monarch who is also a hero, achieving kingship after the conventional interval of trials and warfare. The subject-matter gave Breiðfjörð the opportunity to dedicate one of the mansöngur to his ideas about the absolute monarchy:

Vandi er þeim, sem völdin á,
vel á tígnarstóli drottna;
mikils verð er maktin há,
ef manndyggð lætur eigi þrotna.

Margir kóngar mjög að dáð
málum öllum vilja snúa;
en ef þeir hafa illgjörn ráð,
undir þeim er neyð að búa. 7

Like Bjarni Thorarensen, Breiðfjörð argues for the traditional view that the king's advisers constitute the weak link in an absolute monarchy. But he goes further, claiming that benevolent rule can never be achieved since the king by the very nature of his position must depend on his courtiers whose motives are always suspect. Only through such men can the monarch have access to his subjects:

Sá með eigin augum sér
ekki nema slots-hræsnara,
undirsáta örlög hér
ekki kann frá neinum vara.

Slíkur múgur vísir ver,
að vant að stjórnarháttum gæti;
fólkið kúgast, fantarner
flykkjast upp í valda sæti. 8

Breiðfjörð's typically passionate criticism of any government or rule is hardly mitigated by the final stanza of the mansöngur:

Heill á vorum högum er,
heims forsmáum týrannana,
gæfan oss því vanda ver
valdi undir Föðurs Dana. 9

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7 Núma rímur, p. 69.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p.70.

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Breiðfjörð's belief that the Icelanders were fortunate in their subjection to Frederik VI. Their press often reported upheavals elsewhere in Europe and discussed tyrannical rule in distant countries. Many Icelandic poets conveyed fear and incomprehension at violence and wars abroad. It must also be remembered that Núma rímur were written for one of Breiðfjörð's benefactors, the merchant Á.Ó. Torlacius who probably would not have appreciated strong criticism of the reigning monarch.

Although Breiðfjörð's nature poetry tends to belie both his fatalism and his suspicion of any kind of social order, he sometimes used the analogy of nature to express his opinions about government. In "Fuglaríkið", which first appeared in Ljóðasmámunir in 1839, he sums up his feelings about society and absolute rule. The poem is an allegory where the king of the birds, the eagle, summons his subjects in order to investigate complaints about poverty and maltreatment presented by the lower orders. This is a society with a rigid pecking order. The king at the apex preys on his next in command and so on down the line. Any attempt by the king to ease the life of those at the bottom, is foiled by his agents, the vultures, who prevent the weakest obtaining access to the king. After failing to have their case heard, the small birds return home only to suffer the revenge of their oppressors:

Heim komu þeir í hreiður smá.
Hinir gripfuglar eftir leita,
til hefnda af þeim hami reyta
miskunnarlaust og meira þá.

(Ljóðasafn, I, 212)

The penultimate stanza is a general comment about the nature of society. Although Breiðfjörð avoids branding the king himself as an oppressor of the poor, the implication is clearly there; the vultures are the king's emissaries and operate in his name:

Svo er það enn og svona var,
svartbakar, hrafnar, fálkar, drekar
eru konungsins erindrekar
og meinlausa fugla án miskunnar
afklæða því og eiginn sjóð
uppfylla dátt af þeirra sveita,
svo sem tófan við sauðablóð,
sjúga, kvelja og fjaðrir reyta.

(Ljóðasafn, I, 213)

No solution is offered; but the idea is one that must have appealed to many Icelanders with their long tradition of complaining about crown officials. The king in Breiðfjörð's poem is inevitably remote and his subjects at the mercy of his agents. Thus even a good king cannot be just:

Þótt kóngur öllum vilji vel,
veit hann og sér hann ekki meira
en þessum líst hann láta heyra
þó smáfuglar sýti sig í hel.
Of stórt er ríkið augum tveim
yfir að fara. Því er miður,
að ærufíknin í okkar heim
óþrjótanlega um meira biður.

(Ljóðasafn, I, 213)

The strengthening of national consciousness after 1830 made important changes in attitudes to the monarchy

in Iceland. It gave the Icelanders greater confidence in the worth of their country, especially its history, its untamed nature and its language. This is clearly reflected in Bjarni's royal praises and in similar poems written by clergymen. The pastor Guðmundur Torfason (1798-1879) celebrated the visit in 1834 of Prince Frederik without mentioning his name, but concentrates on showing Iceland's former glory:

> Foldin-jaka mætti mikið
> minnast á að þessu sinni,
> menn er frægir fyrr á dögum
> fákum renndu höfuðbanda.
>
> (Lbs. 3344, 8vo.)

Guðmundur may have avoided praising the prince directly because he was out of favour with the king, but the more important aspect of the poem is the use of a tribute to royalty to praise the motherland. The great majority of such poems have two factors in common - a lack of literary merit and dearth of ideas. The only notable exception written before the mid-century is Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Alþing hið nýja" (1840) which marked a turning-point in attitudes to kingship and absolutism among Icelandic poets. The poem is not a praise of monarchy as an institution but a recognition of Christian VIII's personal interest in the revival of the Alþing. For Jónas a return of the Alþing to its former place at Þingvellir, symbolised a new future for Iceland.

In 1827 the government ordered that the grammar school at Bessastaðir celebrate the king's birthday as was

customary in Danish schools. It was stipulated at the same time that the teachers should publish a Boðsrit, a programme paid for by the government, which was to encourage scholarship in the only academic institution in the country. The Boðsrit, which made an important contribution to Icelandic scholarship of various kinds, stopped temporarily with the death of Frederik VI in 1839. Although it reappeared in 1846, its quality and publication became gradually more irregular. This annoyed several people who complained in the press, claiming that the Boðsrit contributed to the academic standing of the grammar school. The order of 1827 was not simply intended as an encouragement of scholarship among the teachers of the school, but it also professed specifically to awaken the Icelanders' patriotism as Danish citizens. When the grammar school moved to Reykjavík in 1846 the custom of celebrating the king's birthday was revived with new vigour. At this time the school began to fulfil an important function for this tiny capital. The teachers and students were not only a source of income for householders but also put on plays and other public entertainment. Student poets, notably Matthías Jochumsson and Kristján Jónsson (1842-69), contributed several works to the celebration of the king's birthday. After his return from Copenhagen in 1851, Gröndal wrote numerous poems of the kind, both for the school and for social gatherings in the town. A recital of a suitable poem or singing of a new verse with a well-known melody was a

popular way to round off an evening's entertainment or a serious meeting. In a town which had become the first centre of such government as existed in the country, it became a fashion on these occasions to make a salutary reference to the reigning monarch. It was indeed during the third quarter of the century that royal tributes reached a peak of fashion in Iceland.

During the three decades following Jónas's death in 1845, occasional poetry praising the king became increasingly popular culminating in the short-lived enthusiasm generated by Christian IX's visit in 1874. A large proportion of this poetry was commissioned for a certain date and occasion. Looking back on the period later in the century, Benedikt Gröndal had clearly become a trifle embarrassed by the great number of poems he contributed to the genre. He claimed that the poem he wrote on the death of Christian VIII was written because of the entreaties of Jón Sigurðsson, and that welcoming Prince Napoleon to Iceland in 1857 was written for the headmaster Bjarni Jónsson who "almost ordered" Gröndal to carry out the work.[10] Being asked to contribute to official or local functions or to write such a poem for a periodical was a recognition of merit and an honour that few poets could disregard in a country where literary opportunities were limited. This background, however, suggests that few

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10 Dægradvöl, p.130.

poets were really interested in the subject for its own sake. This is forcefully reinforced by the poor quality of the tributes to the monarchs which, with the exception of Jónas's "Alþing hið nýja" and Hjálmar Jónsson's "Ísland" and a few others, were singularly lacking in artistry and imagination.

With the demise of the absolute monarchy in 1848, most educated poets ceased to think of the king as the active head of a social hierarchy or even as a moral force. The attitude expressed by Bjarni Thorarensen had little relevance except among a few unschooled poets. The most important theme in poems praising the Danish kings became, somewhat incongrously, freedom. One of Gröndal's early poems shows well the inevitable paradox in glorifying national freedom and the Danish monarch in the same poem. Written for delegates at the National Convention in 1851, the poem begins by a praise of the king and the imminence of the political freedom that some people expected to be the outcome of this meeting:

er svífurský
af skörum bjarga,
þar felst að baki
frelsis-röðull
himin gyllandi
geislastöfum.

(Kvæðabók, p.10)

In the fifth and penultimate stanza, the poet reflects his awareness of the dichotomy between freedom and foreign rule. This was an important issue in 1851, when Icelandic

nationalists, Jón Sigurðsson in particular, were accused of Schleswig-Holsteinism in the Danish press.[11] Gröndal is eager to assure the king that the Icelanders have no inclinations to follow this path but wish to remain his loyal subjects:

> Enginn skal segja
> að ekki hafi
> eptir þér munað
> Íslands niðjar.
> Enginn skal segja
> að ekki vér
> lofum þig
> nema ljúgi hann.

(Kvæðabók, p.10)

This statement would have been more convincing had Gröndal ended on this note. But he must add another stanza to praise the motherland:

> En enginn segi
> að ýtar nefni
> gylfa og gleymi
> Garðarhólma.
> Það mun bezt
> í brjóstum vorum,
> meðan sól lítur
> á Snælands tind.

(Kvæðabók, pp.10-11)

Earlier poems of this nature never convey a similar tension between the loyalty to the king and a love of country.

The belief in independence as an ultimate goal made the monarchy completely superfluous in Iceland. Although this was not stated directly, poets no longer wrote about the monarchy itself or its function but singled out those

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11 Blaðagreinar, pp.xxxi-xxxii.

kings whom they felt had done something for Iceland. Most educated poets followed Jónas's example and favoured Christian VIII. Gísli Brynjúlfsson even went so far as to suggest that he was the only king ever to have any regard for his Icelandic subjects:

> Ok vel megom vér minnast
> mildings liðins,
> því hann unni oss
> einn konunga.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.318)

"Alþing hið nýja" made some impact on educated poets after Jónas's death, and perhaps did more for the reputation of Christian VIII in Iceland than anything he achieved himself. Writing for the 1855 sitting of the Alþing, Gröndal borrows unashamedly from this and another of Jónas's poem, "Nótt og morgun":

> Þá reis hinn krýndi
> Kristján á stóli:
> Rödd fór um hafið, hyldjúpa leið.
> Vöknuðu vættir
> vondum af draumi -
> Úti var mók og miðnætturskeið.

> (Kvæðabók, p.62)

It would perhaps have been more appropriate to mention the reigning monarch, Frederik VII whose birthday was perhaps the most celebrated Royal event of the century. Jón (1825-60) Þorleifsson/wrote a greeting to Frederik at one of the school's official celebrations, using the one thing all poets praised and found in his favour. As prince he had visited Iceland, albeit not of his own choice. In the poems this appears to be the main reason why the Icelanders should drink to him as a king:

Hann einn, sem Ísland augum litið hefur
Af öllum kóngum Dana og séð þess hag,
.....
skildi því ei frá eynni snævgu hljóma
vor ástarrödd,

(Ljóðmæli, p.25)

Gröndal similarly implied that the most significant aspects of Christian IX's visit in 1874 was that he had observed Iceland's magnificent nature with his own eyes:

sem Þingvöll sá um sumarnótt,
og Snæfellsjökuls tjaldið blátt,
og fjalladal

(Kvæðabók, p.234)

Gröndal, however, was not above the absurd and nonsensical so characteristic of some of this poetry:

Því æ í manna minnum er
sú mæra stund er varstu hér,
og okkur fannst að værum vér
í Paradís.

(Kvæðabók, p.234)

It is not surprising that Gröndal tried later to rationalise his praise of the Danish monarchs. His sure taste in literature did not prevent him from uttering extraordinary platitudes about the way he and his fellow countrymen reacted to the king's brief visit. According to his autobiography, however, he celebrated 1874 rather morosely in Copenhagen.

Considering the relatively large number of unschooled poets in Iceland, it is surprising how few of them appear to have contributed to the lavish tributes to the reigning monarch. It is also remarkable how many of the best known

of these poets, including Símon Bjarnarson, Jón Mýrdal, Júlíana Jónsdóttir and Einar Andrésson, ignored the royal presence in their "Iceland-poems" of 1874.[12] Conversely there were several poets who emulated Eggert Ólafsson's "Ísland" even as late as 1874. By this time Eggert's attitude to the monarchy, always irrelevant in Iceland, had become painfully out of place and at odds with the notions of nationalism. This is very clear in a poem by Jónas Guðmundsson which even attributed the repeal of the restrictions on foreign traders in 1854 to the benevolence of the monarch. The poem uses Eggert's device of making Iceland tell its story and even borrows his words and phrases:

> Eg varð orku vana ýmsri hlaðin þín
> bezt þá buðling Dana bætti kjörin mín,
> fría verzlun fjekk eg þáð,
> einnig líka alþíng sett
> aftur hans af náð.
>
> (Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

By contrast most poets credited Jón Sigurðsson with this progress. A very different attitude is found in Jón Hinriksson's 1874 "Iceland-poem". A passionate nationalist and supporter of Jón Sigurðsson, Jón refers to the monarchy only in a brief blessing at the end of a very long poem. The same attitude can be found in the works of several of the well known unschooled poets who were asked to write for their local celebrations in 1874. Páll

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12 This supports the idea that most royal tributes were in fact written for a particular commission or in the hope of getting them printed separately or in the press.

Ólafsson, who wrote for at least two such local meetings produced uncharacteristically stilted and awkward lyrics - a form of poetry which usually showed him at his best. Perhaps the most deferential poems to the king on this and other occasions were written by the older clergymen. Even Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson, a very nationalistic pastor who wrote a great deal about freedom, expressed an insuperable faith in the king's power to ameliorate the conditions in Iceland and to act as a moral force to the alþýða.

Thus in the seventies, poems dedicated to the Danish monarchs reflect a great variety of attitudes both traditional and new. An entrenched adherence to absolutism apparently lingered on in the older poet's notions of kingship. Yet how far these poems reflected simply a use of older forms of poetry, thought to be appropriate to an important occasion, is difficult to establish. Sometimes a poet's work as a whole suggests that the sentiments in a royal tribute were not in tune with his attitudes to society and government, but this is not always the case. Brynjólfur Oddsson, for example, not only idolised Jón Sigurðsson but was also very much a liberal. The editor of his poetry (1944) was clearly embarrassed that a man of Brynjólfur's political convictions could express undiscriminating royalism. To a nationalist in the nineteen-forties, this reflected inconsistency, but it is possible to see these poems as evidence that the

Icelanders had acquired a new confidence and self-respect in relation to Denmark and the king himself. Brynjólfur writes well of the king but he is not deferential. The emphasis in the poem is on Iceland and the hope that the king will show himself to be a protector of its freedom:

> Góðan konung að vér eigum,
> eykur hug og dáð,
> frelsi vort er vona megum
> vermdi sinni náð. 13

On the king's birthday he drinks to him in the name of Iceland's independence:

> Eyjan snjógva ægiborna
> á komandi tíð
> sjer í anda frelsið forna
> fylla von um síð;
> uppá það að þessu sinni
> því vors konungs drekkum minni.[14]

Writing more than twenty years after "Alþing hið nýja", Brynjólfur praises the king for supporting Iceland's freedom. There is no longer any hint of Sigurður Pétursson's humble address to "vor sól ... austri í". Brynjólfur greets the king very much in the style of the <u>þjóðskáld</u> in the latter half of the period:

> Þér heilsa engin hræsnis-ljóð,
> vor hilmir dýr.
> Þér heilsar norrænt hetju-blóð,
> þér heilsar Ingólfs sögu-þjóð,
> er alin er við ís og glóð,
> vor öðling dýr.

(<u>Ljóðmæli</u>, p.2)

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13 <u>Nokkur ljóðmæli</u> (Reykjavík, 1869), p.49.

14 <u>Ibid</u>., p.50.

Here Matthías Jochumsson speaks remarkably like an ambassador of a great nation speaking to a foreign head of state.

This trend contrasts rather starkly with one of the best known "Iceland-poems" of 1874, Hjálmar Jónsson´s "Ísland". The poem has often been described as an exception to the nationalistic contribution of the period which seems particularly true about its passion, stark images and concern with the conditions of the Icelandic people here and now. Although the poem may seem to look forward to a more consciously social literature, its attitude to the monarchy appears almost unbearably deferential coming from such a rebellious spirit as Hjálmar. But Hjálmar was born in the eighteenth century and his attitude to society was always within the bounds of a paternalistic hierarchy. The poem reflects the sentiment of someone who from his birth had to depend on the generosity of his betters - someone who knew that he would probably end his life poor and dependent. Thus he respected sympathy from above, as much as he damned those who had power but scorned their duty towards the poor. Like Jónas Hallgrímsson in 1841, Hjálmar was grateful for a noble gift from a king - freedom - but it is very clear that he was desperately worried about the future of Iceland and equally desperate to secure the king´s support in an uncertain future. Hjálmar was never at a loss for words when appealing to help from his superiors

or expressing gratitude for charity received:

> Þigg nú minn hreinan kærleiks koss,
> kveðjan tárvota mín er þessi:
> Héðan vér væntum heilla oss,
> hilmi vorn styrki guð og blessi.
>
> (Ritsafn, I, 16)

It is impossible to produce a neat summary of the real feelings towards the monarchy harboured by the Icelanders by the third quarter of the century. Poets did not express animosity towards the monarchy but on the other hand a new generation brought up on nationalism had limited interest in the institution as such. Some of the royal tributes in 1874 had an ominous finality. For Páll Ólafsson the new constitution was simply the end of the road for the monarchy in Iceland:

> Nú ertu þá frí og frjáls,
> fjallakonan mjallahvíta.
> Legðu kóngi hönd um háls,
> hans er gjöfin, þú ert frjáls.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.207)

Only a very small minority of poets had any place for a king in their vision of the future, nor had a monarchy relevance to their notions of nationality. It is significant that later in the century both Benedikt Gröndal and Matthías Jochumsson tried to convince their readers that they had never been royalists. Such sentiments appeared in their work, they argued, primarily because of pressure to provide entertainment on special occasions or was a continuation of traditional poetry. The ancient metre dróttkvætt, which was adapted in

several poems by most of the þjóðskáld, was above all used to praise heroes. By the tenth century it became the form used by the court poets to praise kings and noblemen. The genre was well known in Iceland and had provided the rímur poets with material and vocabulary for centuries. Although there is no direct stylistic connection between this poetry and the majority of tributes written to the Danish kings during the nineteenth century, it may well have played a part in the relative ease with which the Icelanders praised their king. It is significant, however, that the nationalist poets never addressed a monarch directly as the king of Iceland or the Icelanders. He was addressed as the father of the people or even as our king, but he remained the king of Denmark and the Danes.

CHAPTER 9

National Unity; Social Divisions

Observing the 1874 celebrations in Iceland, the New York Tribune reporter, Mr. Baynard Taylor, was particularly struck by the lack of servility in the bearing and expression of the common people - "If one has the right to use the word 'common' to describe such a people".[1] Taylor admitted frankly that he was a little puzzled by these strange people who watched him with such intense but unobtrusive curiosity. Their "stoical" and "indifferent" faces reminded him of Indian tribes in America, and their quaint social habits - e.g. high and low sharing meals while travelling - could only be a remnant from the old Gothic sense of equality. It is indeed difficult to recognise Icelandic society from many accounts written by sophisticated nineteenth-century visitors, some of whom clearly had very limited knowledge of the lower orders in their own country. Watching the Icelanders in their Sunday-best awaiting the arrival of their king, Taylor's most natural frame of reference was something alien, outdated and above all primitive. Yet he felt quite at home engaging in small talk in English with the daughters

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1 New York Tribune, 27th August 1874, Extra, 22, 6.

of the better burghers of the town.

During the period from the thirties to the seventies, the political and literary élite in Iceland - including the þjóðskáld - were more often than not educated abroad and well-travelled. Although they stayed primarily in Copenhagen, many of them had visited major European towns such as London, Berlin, Paris and even Rome. For years they lived in a capital city and mixed with people accustomed to a far more rigid class structure and habits than were practised in Iceland. As Reykjavík began to grow - it reached a thousand inhabitants around the mid-century - the difference between the classes probably became more pronounced. Although a Danish-educated official in the eighteenth century, such as Eggert Ólafsson, may occasionally have treated his social inferiors in a more formal style than prevailed among his nineteenth-century successors, segregation was practically impossible on the Icelandic farms. The way officials or clergy related to the people in their charge depended very much on individuals, and the word alþýðlegur, was a great and not uncommon compliment to a superior who behaved as if he was one of the people. As Reykjavík became a town, poets and novelists began to convey more than simply a dislike of the place itself; there is a greater tendency to associate it with foreign dress and habits, superficial values, snobbery and pretentiousness. The best known such criticism is in Jón Thoroddsen's Piltur og stúlka but

similar notions, sometimes grim rather than humorous, can be found in contemporary poetry.

Most Danish-educated Icelanders who gave an account of their homecoming after an extended stay in Denmark tended to view their countrymen through half-foreign eyes. In 1835, Tómas Sæmundsson expresses the characteristic impatience of the returning scholar. Viewing Reykjavík, which consisted of a few good houses surrounded by quickly-erected shacks, he apparently felt an urge to reorganise and tidy up. The landless poor and the fishermen must be moved out of the town and put "einhvurstaðar við sjóinn ... svo þaraf mætti verða fiskimanna-þorp, sem væri minni óprýði að".[2] The same paternalism towards the majority of people, especially the poorer sort, can be found in the writings of most Danish-educated contemporaries. Tómas, who had just arrived from an extended European tour, expressed ideas not only rare in Iceland but perhaps also a little untimely in a town with less than a thousand people. He clearly desired to see the town planned in terms of social segregation and had little sympathy with the improvident who "slóra so margan dag ... og eru að slabba um strætin með hendur í vösum, eða styðjast framá búðarborðið í brennivínssníkjum".[3]

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2 Fjölnir, I, 68.

3 Ibid.

A much more complicated impact on social and cultural divisions came from the influence of Romanticism, which was at the heart of the renaissance in Icelandic literature. What contemporaries, especially the unschooled, called nýji skáldskapurinn, "the new poetry", reflected Romantic ideals of beauty, form and meaning. A subject-matter should be expressed in the metre and imagery which best echoed and extended the content. Such ideas were not completely alien to the traditional poetry with its rather formal metres and poetic language. Within the limits of rigid patterns of rhythm and rhyme, the traditional poets, notably Sigurður Breiðfjörð, were surprisingly inventive. With a few exceptions, the influence of Romanticism on the unschooled poets tended initially to be extremely haphazard and awkward. They lacked the acquired sophistication of their educated colleagues and relied primarily on traditions when choosing metre for their verse. Thus while the þjóðskáld gradually delegated religion to special categories - hymns, obituaries and prayers - or ignored it altogether, many versemakers could not resist the temptation of adding a Christian homily or digression, regardless of their central subject-matter. It is true that the þjóðskáld often included a reference to God in nationalistic poetry but, with the exception of Matthías Jochumsson, this was usually kept to a minimum or integrated into the general theme. Certain topics began to be regarded as inappropriate for serious poetry, or at least demanded extra complexity and sophistication in treatment. Thus social and political

criticism tended to be metaphorical rather than explicit, or else it was presented in satires, parodies or even the pithy traditional stanza which began to acquire quite a novel function in the "new" style. Thus Jónas Hallgrímsson wrote poems about animals - Óhræsið, Heiðlóarkvæði, Grátittlingurinn - which were undoubtedly intended partly as comments on human society but nevertheless were not strictly speaking allegories.

The Romantic influence in Iceland not only brought a revival of ancient forms, introduced foreign ideas and a new imaginative approach to literature, but it also widened the gulf between the educated and the unschooled poets. Educated critics did not argue explicitly that a poet must have an education, yet very often this was implied in the tone of their criticism as well as in comments about the influence of education on man's sensibilities. This was a very important aspect of Jónas Hallgrímsson's criticism of the rímur. Unlike previous critics of popular poetry, the Romantics were not interested in a lack of morality and godliness, or even in the frivolity of the subject-matter of the rímur. What they objected to was simply what they saw as bad poetry, without beauty or imagination. It is also significant that unremarkable poetry by educated poets was never criticised with the same lack of courtesy that was directed to the work of unschooled poets. Jónas, moreover, never wrote about Eggert's Kvæði (1832) which

hardly observed the demands he made on Sigurður Breiðfjörð. In 1874 a comment appeared in <u>Þjóðólfur</u> on two recently published books of poems by Jón Mýrdal and Símon Bjarnarson Dalaskáld which reflects this very well. The critic begins by admitting that he has not considered it worthwhile to read the books with close attention because they are clearly full of nonsense and bad taste. He then goes on to say that:

> Það er ekkert á móti því að ólærðir menn yrki og gefi út rit, en kasti þeir vísvitandi höndunum til skáldskaparlistarinnar, verður dýrð þeirra minni en engin. Skáldskapargyðjan er ein harla fín frú. Um karaktera, titla, hempur og kjóla spyr hún að vísu ekki, en vilji menn ná hylli hennar, er ráðlegast að þvo sér fyrst um hendurnar eða að minnsta kosti setja upp sparivettlingana."

The flippant and superior tone of this criticism was clearly offensive to unschooled poets struggling to be taken seriously.

In the eighteenth century Eggert Ólafsson had used poetry to air his views on all manner of things, including contemporary society. He discussed social behaviour and relationships and offered detailed remedies for a variety of social ills. The publication of his poetry in 1832 did little to improve the artistry of the unschooled poets and older clergymen, who emulated or plagiarised his copious rhymed tracts, yet it whetted their taste for writing poetry that had direct relevance to contemporary society. By contrast Eggert's prosaic style left no mark on the more sophisticated poets. Literature depicting social

conditions became a fashion among educated writers only during the last decades of the nineteenth century. By this time prose-writing had developed to such an extent that short stories, novels and drama provided a more popular media for social criticism and comments than poetry.

Written primarily by unschooled poets and clergymen, the "social" poetry of the period can be divided broadly into two categories. Firstly, a conscious criticism of the system or of a particular class or profession. Others voiced the grievances of a class or a group, notably farmers. Secondly, more indirect comments on society expressed in poems about specific grievances arising from the poet's environment and circumstances. Four main factors determined the character of this poetry: traditional attitudes to religion and to society, the entrenched poverty in Iceland, and finally nationalism. Complaints about poverty, shortages, bad seasons, ill health and the pain and indignity of growing old in a harsh society were nothing new in Icelandic literature. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century poets wrote extensively on these subjects, usually in a tone of abject pessimism. Some of the popular genres dating from this period such as the ellikvæði - poems about old age - and the heimsósómi - descriptions of social decline and immorality - show a depressing attitude to life.[4] The most common complaints

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4 Bókmenntir á lærdómsöld contains a discussion of these genres and the most important authors of the period.

before the nineteenth century related to personal suffering: old age, ill-health or oppression because of injustice or maltreatment at the hands of merchants, government officials or the clergy. Farmers complained bitterly about their servants' sloth and impertinence, and the pastor reproached his flock because of their moral depravity and disobedience to the word of God. Most of this poetry, and that which followed in the eighteenth century, was not concerned with the nature of the social system. Poets appealed to God rather than demanding social or political changes from their governors. Explanations and solutions were based primarily on Holy Scripture, on precepts such as obedience and charity which provided the opposite ends of the social spectrum with equally plausible arguments for their case. Although a cause of grievance might stem directly from a political decision, the poet's main concern was with his own situation in this world or in the life hereafter, rather than with social problems. Even genres that dealt specifically with contemporary society - e.g. the aldarháttur - tended to be primarily concerned with morality and with human behaviour and relationships.

Throughout the period traditional attitudes to style, to religion and social relationships were an important influence on this poetry. This is demonstrated particularly well in the unschooled poets' treatment of the timeless subject of human suffering of various origins. The

inevitability and recurrence of sickness and early death did not diminish the poets' interest in the subject or produce calm acceptance, even among the devout. Most poets simply accepted the justice of God's never-ending punishments for original sin or individual and collective transgressions. Yet many were torn between their faith and the frustration of watching the waste and futility of sickness, poverty and the premature death of friends and relatives. Like most of her contemporaries, Helga Þórarinsdóttir (1797-1874), the wife of a farmer of average means, had many occasions to mourn death; and her poems on the subject reflect a very characteristic attitude during the period. Lamenting the death of a grown son, she accepts reluctantly that man must answer the call of God whenever it arrives. Like most poets of her social standing, she finds comfort in the essential justice inherent in the levelling principle of death, yet ultimately religion fails to make suffering endurable:

> Sannmæli þvílík sansana mína
> sefa þó nokkuð því reynslan er ljós;
> harðar mig þó hugraunir pína,
> hér er visnuð æskunnar rós;
> hjartans blæðir sárið af sári
> Sveinn er dáinn þjóðræmdur best
> fallin drýgja tárin með tári
> tilfelli þetta skapraunar mest.
>
> (Lbs. 3993, 4to.)

The desolation and pessimism in obituaries of close family and friends are echoed in poems expressing personal grievances arising from poverty and the unprofitable toil of primitive farming. Although the <u>þjóðskáld</u> wrote

the occasional poem in this vein, they tended not to complain about such matters in verse. The unschooled poets on the other hand vented their rage and frustration in verse-letters, spontaneous stanzas and pseudo-religious poetry. Among the most fatalistic poems of this kind were the traditional ellikvæði which some poets began to write as early as their late forties. Hjálmar Jónsson celebrated several birthdays in this fashion, describing his mental and physical decline, anticipating old age and death in deprivation and discomfort. In "Vertíðarlok", written when he was fifty, he describes himself as a lonely and desperate old man:

> Lífs er farinn forði,
> fá ei unnið hendur
> neitt til nytsemdar;
> brauð er þurrt á borði,
> blátt þar vatnið stendur
> til vista og vellystar.
> Holdlaus beinin hristir kuldinn skæði,
> hnútur gægjast út um rifið klæði,
> götin á, sem gína við úr æði,
> gullskorð engin sóar við þau þræði.

(Ritsafn, I, 48)

Páll Ólafsson, who had an altogether different life, frequently expressed similar sentiments. He was only fifty when he began to write ellikvæði where he concentrates on physical decrepitude and loss of friends rather than on poverty:

> Fótum er þróttur þrotinn,
> þreytt brjóst mæðir hósti,
> hár og skegg er að hærast,
> heyrn og sýn er að dvína.
> Farið er fyrri ára
> fjör úr augum snörum,
> Án em ég orðinn vina,
> ellinni meir það hrellir.

(Ljóðmæli, p.217)

This is perhaps a surprising self-portrait of a man who was yet to marry a second time, to a young wife, and father several children. Although moderately well placed when he wrote this poem, Páll was not the most thrifty of farmers and his financial circumstances were always precarious. He believed, however, that after fifty, life could only be a steady decline with increasing lack of security. Þórarinn Sveinson (1778-1859)was another poet who described old age in horrific terms:

> Sjónleysi, kláði
> og kuldi á fótum
> fylgt hafa hennar
> föruneyti.
>
> (Lbs. 393, 8vo.)

But as a sincerely religious man, Þórarinn clearly felt rather guilty about expressing a distaste for the kind of life God had given him. Thus his bitter complaints about poverty, hunger or old age are often followed by something he feels is pleasing to God. He therefore ends this poem by admitting that old age at least gives man the time and desire to reach the place of eternal bliss.

Bad housing and the discomforts of a cold winter were further common grievances which the unschooled poets conveyed in their work. Older poets in particular tended to address their complaints to God, sometimes in the form of a prayer. Þorsteinn Gizurarson (1767-1844) wrote a typical example of this in 1824, reflecting not only on the physical discomfort most Icelanders suffered in winter but also on the boredom and restriction of this

season when it had to be endured in a dark and unpleasant house:

kofum þá ég inn í er,
ekki sést til að líta í kver
snjór hvar fýkur út og inn,
aumt er að lifa drottinn minn,
þæga gef oss þrauta rýrð,
þitt er ríkið máttur og dýrð.

(Lbs. 1324, 4to.)

In the eighteenth century Eggert Ólafsson had written several poems, notably Búnaðarbálkur, which painted an idealised picture of winter activity on the Icelandic farm. A century later Steingrímur Thorsteinsson viewed the farmhouse with similar nostalgia. The pastoral poem was very much an exception in the period, and the contented farmer-poet expressing delight in his daily chores was indeed a rarity. Most poets condemned the corruption and cultural depravity they believed existed in towns, but those actually engaged in working the land or in fishing rarely praised such occupations. The most joyful subject to do with country life was undoubtedly that of a mild winter, good summer and the horse. A few farmers wrote about mowing grass as if this afforded them some pleasure. The best known such poem is, however, Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Sláttuvísa":

Glymur ljárinn, gaman!
Grundin þýtur undir,
hreyfir sig í hófi
hrífan létt mér ettir,

(Rit I, 132)

Recited at a meeting of the Fjölnisfélag in Copenhagen,

the poem undoubtedly brought back pleasant memories of their youth to the homesick "exiles" in Denmark.

Many stanzas reflect the toil and discomfort of Icelandic farming in this period. Þórarinn Sveinsson expressed a common annoyance about very inferior quality implements used on most Icelandic farms:

Mín ei bítur mikið spík,
Mjög þó orku reyni,
Það er eins og tannlaus tík
Tögli á gömlum steini.

(Lbs. 393, 8vo.)

Sigurður Lynge wrote a number of poems about farm work which paint it in a rather unattractive light, especially mowing. He was clearly more enamoured of the sea and fishing and wrote about the pleasure of sailing out to sea on an early spring morning. Yet the darker side of this occupation also figures in his poetry. The unquestioned, and perhaps only, heroes of the Icelandic working people were the formenn, the skippers of the small fishing boats around Iceland. A great number of poems were written in their honour - usually rather dull enumerations of their names and most favourable characteristics. Such poetry was perhaps made more popular by contributions from well known poets such as Jónas Hallgrímsson. Many farmers and farmhands, however, agreed with Páll Ólafsson that having to earn one's living on the land was no "poesi".

The þjóðskáld - and a few clergymen and unschooled

poets - regarded pessimism and complaining as pervasive and dangerous aspect of national life in Iceland. Rather than whine about their problems, the people ought to work hard, follow the advice of their leaders or do whatever a particular poet felt contributed most effectively to the welfare of the country. This was not only the message in Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Ísland" but also a running theme in the periodical literature. Poets isolated various reasons for the decline in the country's fortunes, including foreign oppression and natural disasters. Yet apathy and listlessness were seen as a major cause by most educated nationalists.

It is perhaps not surprising that despondency and frustration were common among the Icelanders, especially perhaps among a younger generation of poets fired with newly awakened national awareness. The pace of change was very slow throughout the period and encouragements were rarely backed up with practical incentives. Yet many people with education and status held forth about the people's apathy and the need to improve and develop. The relationship between educated and unschooled poets in some ways reflected this situation. The former had limited sympathy with persistent complaints and rarely considered seriously the latter's obvious attempts to emulate their literary superiors. Good-humouredly the educated parodied the popular stanza, ridiculed stilted language and adherence to archaic literary style. In their correspondence

and periodicals the educated poets carried on a ceaseless and passionate debate on how to improve everything from industry and agriculture to the people's aesthetic sensibility. An example of the way the unschooled poets laments were parodied was written by Guðmundur Einarsson (1823-65), a secretary to the sýslumaður in Húnavatnssýsla. The poem, "Búrasöngur" captures the funereal tone of this poetry at its worst:

> Allir hlutir af sér ganga í öllum löndum,
> hætt er mjög við háska og grandi
> heimurinn fer dagversnandi. 5

Whereas in most other European countries, nationalism developed in a period of political upheavals and economic changes, in Iceland it arrived during an entrenched stagnation. In Western Europe the early nineteenth century saw acceleration in urban growth and industrialisation which fostered social divisions and brought about demands for political change. In Iceland on the other hand, the only ripples to break the even surface of politics between 1830 and 1874 were a direct result of the movement itself. The struggle for executive, fiscal and legislative powers dominated political debates and, until the last two were achieved in 1874, democracy and human rights remained side-issues. There was no radical or popular political force in the country from which

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5 "Kvæði eftir Guðmund Einarsson", Eimreiðin, XIV, 1908, 184-224.

nationalism could draw support or political directions. Its ethos came primarily from the higher echelons of the social strata, an enclosed group of men drawn together by their education, sometimes by voluntary "exile" in Denmark or family connections. Their nationalistic message included a call for a re-education of a politically inactive and inexperienced population. Yet their main appeal was to common cultural traditions, emphasising national freedom and unity, rather than a promise of better standards of living and popular rights.

Partly because it dominated public debate, the nationalist movement was profoundly important in moulding social ideas and expectations. It affected not only the way the Icelanders saw themselves in relation to other nations, but also influenced their attitudes to each other. True to its nature, nationalism in Iceland had no party, its primary aim was to unite people of different backgrounds and social standing for the limited purpose of achieving national independence. As a political ideology it was therefore inevitably deficient in theories concerning the internal government or institutions of the state. Nevertheless, it had underlying social and economic dimensions. Then as now, nationalists applied pragmatic economic arguments to further their cause, perhaps to placate an élite who feared that separation would leave them stranded in an economic and cultural backwater. Yet, by contrasting independence with the humility of

subjugation, nationalism implicitly offered a radical perspective on social relationships.

Poetry affords a significant, if limited, evidence of the importance nationalism played in forming new social attitudes among unschooled poets. It shows that although cultural nationalism constituted the base of the movement as a popular phenomenon, material prosperity and social justice were implicitly associated with independence. Most unschooled poets made direct association between national freedom and prosperity in their interpretation of the Golden Age and marvelled moreover at the supposed status and dignity it gave to farmers and poets. It is of course impossible to assume that every poem expressing an economic grievance or offering social comments reflects a consistent attitude to society as a whole. The occasional quatrain was often simply a registration of momentary anger and a criticism of individuals or passing events. It would undoubtedly be naive to exaggerate the sophistication of most unschooled poets' concept of society. Yet it is perhaps equally undiscerning to deny them a serious and consistent point of view for the reason that their ideas were often expressed in mediocre poetry and in unfashionable verse forms.

Modern historians and critics have by default disregarded the opinions and ideas of the nineteenth-century alþýðuskáld. It is no doubt justifiable to exclude

but a selected few from literary histories since most of their poetry does not satisfy modern taste, or possibly did not always satisfy their much less critical contemporaries. Hannes Pétursson's book on the life and work of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson reflects a typical modern attitude. He argues that contemporary popular versemaking differed fundamentally from Steingrímur's satires and criticism of the governing élite. He shows convincingly that Steingrímur's poetry had a "bakhjall í óhagganlegu viðhorfi við umhverfinu og er látin túlka það aftur og aftur".[6] Steingrímur, Hannes argues, was committed to the idea of society summed up in his translation of Burns's,

> The rank is but the guinea's stamp;
> The Man's the gowd for a' that.[7]

Studied separately rather than as a whole, Hannes continues, these poems do not differ fundamentally from similar poems by the alþýðuskáld. Nevertheless he goes on to argue that the latter's poetry, unlike that of Steingrímur, does not extend beyond a simple response to transitory occasions and moods.

It is of course impossible to deny the fact that the unschooled poet wrote more extensively about specific events and insignificant incidents than his educated

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6 Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, p.221.

7 Robert Burns, Songs of Liberty (London, 1944) p.98

counterpart. These poets were also a more numerous and a less homogeneous group than the handful of þjóðskáld most of whom came from similar backgrounds, had similar education and experiences and often knew each other intimately. Versemaking was a national pastime and only a minority of those who tried their hand at rhyme were considered by their contemporaries to be worthy of the title poet or even rhymer. The majority of unschooled poets used in this thesis belonged to a body of people known locally or even nationally as poets of one kind or another. Some of their poetry circulated widely in manuscript or periodicals as well as orally. They wrote down a great number of their poems, especially what they considered serious works, sometimes systematically imitating printed books - Eggert Ólafsson's Kvæði, for example. The difference between this poetry as a whole and that of the more educated poets lies in style, especially in the earlier part of the period, and in the choice of subject-matter rather than in a consistency of ideas and attitudes. Not only did individual poets hold principled opinions about society, but they often wrote from a point of view reflecting common social assumptions and experiences.

After the 1830s there is some evidence to suggest that unschooled poets were beginning to express a new impatience with the conditions in which they lived or were perhaps less weighed down by their situation than previously.

There was no sudden change in attitudes, rather a gradual shift in emphasis from the traditional complaints about the inevitability of poverty and inequality, towards a more coherent social criticism. In a few poems there is to be found a clear demand that conditions should be made more tolerable for the nation as a whole. One aspect of this change was a gradual erosion of a blind faith in religion as the basis of social organisation and the only source of release from human suffering. This is evident in some of the many quasi-religious poems written to mark the end of one year and the beginning of the next, always a time for reflection and introspection. The poet would stop to look back on his life, spiritual and material, at the state of the country and perhaps give a passing thought to the purpose of life. At the end of 1845, Daði Níelsson wrote a poem called "Andvarp", a very common title given to religious poems in the period. He begins by an address to God, thanking him for "náð, heill og frelsis von". The reference to a promise of freedom relates most probably to national independence, rather than the traditional freedom in Christ. This perhaps reflects expectations in relation to the new Alþing which sat for the first time earlier in the year. Later in the poem Daði used the word freedom directly about his own circumstances:

Sjúkdóma, skort og margkyns með
mótlæti reynt hef eg
og frelsun enga fyrir sjeð,
frá því á nokkurn veg,
beðið um hlýfð og hjálp
heims opt við þjáningar,
sýnst að þú vildir synja mjer
syndugum aðstoðar.

(Lbs. 1460, 4to.)

Apart from conveying the characteristic pessimism of the unschooled poet describing his lot and his humility in the presence of God, the poem has an almost imperceptible tone of impiety. The desire for release from suffering here and now and the denial of the possibility of solace is a break with tradition. Since the late Middle Ages, poets had consistently painted a beautiful picture of the life hereafter where man was freed from the bondage of his earthly travails. The influence of the Enlightenment made no real impact on this attitude in spite of the efforts of men such as Magnús Stephensen. Even an educated man of the stature of Bjarni Thorarensen never contemplated the possibility of freedom in this life, an idea that continued to have an important place in the works of unschooled poets, particularly of the older generation. Hjálmar Jónsson, for example, used the phrase "land of freedom" to describe heaven; only through death did man gain release from bondage and suffering. In contrast Jónas Guðmundsson was in no doubt that man needed to think about his earthly sustenance to be a human being. In a verse letter he sighed wishfully, "Ó, at jeg væri auðugur nú/ eins og Roschild af peningonum". Jónas wrote a great deal of religious poetry but when he and his family were faced

with the endemic hunger of spring, he did not turn to God. The medicine for the disease was simply to wait impatiently until he could leave his farm to go to sea. The hunger and disease which plagued the poor in spring was less desperate for those who had access to the sea:

> Eg veit þó bestu lækninguna
> ynntaka dugir mjer til muna,
> þeg meina háf eða grásleppuna
> þvi sjúkdómskvillinn sultur er.
>
> (Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

It is tempting to argue that the unschooled poets' new emphasis on social improvements, rather than hopelessly awaiting the life hereafter, was in some way related to the growing faith in nationalism after 1830. The nationalist propaganda centred on freedom, a spirit of independence and the past when men had presumably been free. This is supported not only by the fact that nationalism remained the most important idea of the period, but also by the sentiments expressed in nationalistic poetry after 1848. The mid-century brought the political debate with Denmark to the local level in various ways, notably in the form of meetings in connection with the main National Convention in 1851. Of the many poems celebrating the events of these years, the best known is perhaps Hjálmar Jónsson's "þjóðfundarsöngur". It is a typical ættjarðarljóð in its address to the motherland, "Aldin móðir eðalborna,/ Ísland, konan heiðarlig". The emphasis, however, is not on nature or the past, moral decline or apathy. It combines

three central themes: patriotism, social concern and religion seen in the light of contemporary poverty and suffering. The description of the country itself - "karlæg nær og holdlaus er" - underlines the ghastly image of a child, "the people" suckling an aged and shrivelled mother:

> Þér á brjósti barn þitt liggur,
> blóðfjaðrirnar sogið fær;
>
> (Ritsafn, I, 5)

The tone is one of frustration and immediacy directed against those who fail to act to save the motherland - for Hjálmar always associated with the people rather than with national greatness - and against an immovable God.

Hjálmar is the best known of the many unschooled poets who consistently expressed the grievance of the poorer sort. His social criticism drew on personal experiences, that of people without family connections or wealth. By hard work he had managed to provide his family with sustenance and shelter. Yet when his physical strength had gone there was little left except the help of an unmarried daughter, the parish, and donations from charitable admirers of his poetry. A great deal of Hjálmar's outcry against poverty was written about his own situation. Less numerous are his poems describing the circumstances of the poor but these are equally bitter and urgent, and usually more original and forceful than his private complaints. Similar sentiments were typical of most unschooled poets in

Hjálmar's circumstances and, like many of his generation, he reflects both traditional attitudes to society and new ideas. He demanded immediate attention to the condition of the poor but did not direct his anger primarily at the social system. His ideas were basically from the same roots as those of Bjarni Thorarensen, who died in 1841 before the nationalist movement acquired clear overtones of democracy. Like many poets born around the turn of the century and who lived to see the seventies, Hjálmar was not a radical demanding a new social order, but condemning the failure of the paternalistic system. His intense dislike of Bjarni Thorarensen - the highest official of the Crown in the district where Hjálmar lived all his life - stemmed from personal antagonism. Bjarni had instigated a search for stolen sheep on his farm, a humiliation which Hjálmar never forgot. On Bjarni's death he wrote a much criticised poem expressing pleasure at the passing away of a haughty and uncharitable governor. In the same poem, however, Hjálmar praises Bjarni's predecessor for combining authority and human kindness. Hjálmar's acrimonious poems about clergymen, similarly did not reflect "class" antagonism but conveyed a personal dislike and humiliation because of what he felt was a shameful treatment of himself by several servants of God.

Like most unschooled poets of his generation, Hjálmar did not envisage a society without the traditional social hierarchy. He felt no incongruity at all in asking to be

respected as a human being and at the same time demand charity for himself. Many poets expressed the same attitude when denied food and shelter on their travels; and, when treated well, reacted with due and expected deference. Hjálmar´s society was essentially pre-commercial where the better-off understood their Christian duty to provide for the poor and in return received loyalty and respect. This is reflected in a poem expressing gratitude to a prosperous farmer who in memory of his son, invited the poorest people in his parish to three days of feasting, culminating in the hand-out of money and gifts. This unusual generosity is explained in terms of traditional Christianity: God sows the seed of charity in the hearts of the rich and the farmer responds correctly by extending his fortune to the poor:

> Út nefndi þiggendur
> þrettán í tal,
> fatlaða og vanfæra
> féleysinga.
> Guð honum benti
> á borðgestina,
> því hann þekkti bezt
> þarfir vorar.
>
> (Ritsafn, I, 75)

Hjálmar naturally identifies with the weak - "volaða og veika/ vesalinga" - whose status at the bottom rung of society ought not to make them outcasts. The degeneration in Icelandic society, he asserts, is that these people are neglected by their superiors. Hjálmar clearly could not resist a stab at the government and even the king himself:

Hvaðan er brauð það,
á borði stendur?
Hefur sjóli vor
sent oss gáfur,
eður stjórn hans stutt
stöðu vora?
Það mun sannlega
silfur kosta.

(Ritsafn, I, 73)

Hjálmar was not only concerned with the neglect of the material needs of the poor but also with the effect of disregard and displacement on their soul. The poor experienced spiritual torments more acutely than the better-off who had their unfair share of affection and concern from other people and officialdom. "Leiðindastökur í myrkrinu" is a typically depressing poem on the subject written in the direct language of the occasional quatrain:

Enginn greinir aumingjans
ástand neinum talið,
sjást ei meinin sálar hans,
þótt særist fleinum andskotans.

(Ritsafn, I, 88-9)

Unschooled poets wrote a great deal about man's spiritual pilgrimage but such poetry rarely has social overtones. Surprisingly few poets, however, wrote as if they themselves coveted wealth or even considered it desirable. One exception to this is to be found in the novels of the period, notably Mannamunur by Jón Mýrdal. Jón made wealth the inevitable reward for honesty and nobility of character and his conclusions tend to have a simplistic fairy-tale quality. Jón, however, was particularly lacking in taste and sensitivity as a writer. This lack

of literary judgement is demonstrated in a verse letter to C.Holm, a benefactor whom he showers with imaginary riches:

> Auðlegð safnist að þjer fram úr hófi
> auranna svo þú varla munir tal,
> eins og þá hríð i hörðu vetrar kófi
> hrúgar upp snjó í þröngum jökuldal.
>
> Ánægjan blessuð aldrei frá þjer víki
> og engin gjaldþrot bægi henni fjær,
> unz að þú svo í æðri heima ríki
> um eilífð verða stórkaupmaður nær.

(Grýla, p.136)

An example of the Icelandic versemaker at his worst, the poem provides grotesque imagery of wealth and prosperity. It is a testimony to this kindly poet's lack of artistry as well as to his deference to his betters.

Throughout the period, the Christian precept "Blessed be ye poor, for your's is the Kingdom of God" (Luke VI 20) remained a great consolation to the unschooled poet. This was perhaps a reflection of the near impossibility for most Icelanders of acquiring more than the bare essentials to sustain body and mind. Sigurður Breiðfjörð, for example, was in no doubt that poverty was morally superior to wealth and justified his own improvidence by showing that wealth was simply unnatural. In his Rímur af Fertrami og Plató (1823) he used the derogatory phrase "skildinganna mónarkí" to show the immorality of judging men and their efforts in terms of monetary values. In one of several poems written in the period titled "Ríkur og fátækur", he argues that by gathering wealth men mistrust God the provider. The rich man is afraid to place his

destiny in the hands of the Almighty:

Þú þorir ei hans umsjón í
að afhenda slíka hluti nú,
þú vilt ei eiga undir því,
á auðin setur meiri trú.

(Ljóðsafn, III, 157)

Moreover, wealth is futile when the final call comes:

Kannski þú deyir, karl minn, þá,
en kisturnar liggja fullar samt.

(Ljóðsafn, III, 157)

Although the poorer sort of unschooled poets complained about poverty, their philosophy of life was often surprisingly stoical. Lýður Jónsson, discussing his miserable circumstances, saw poverty as a heavy burden but takes suffering with great equanimity:

Þótt að hliðum ríði ramt
raunum blandað kífið,
ánægður eg svona samt
sóðast gegnum lífið.

Galið er að girnast skraut
gótzi að saman mokum
því allir gaungum alheimsbraut
alsnauðir að lokum.

(Íb. 636, 8vo.)

Written in 1832, when Lýður was just over thirty, the poem shows a greater acceptance of poverty and inequality than his later works which were on occasions surprisingly radical.

Nationalism undoubtedly fostered unity in Iceland and counteracted the development of radical political ideas. Yet to a certain extent it created a new perspective on social differences. Inevitably a focus on national unity

gave rise to dissatisfaction with social hierarchy and paternalism. These were hardly class sentiments comparable to those in larger societies where divisions were more distinct and differences in wealth far greater and more pronounced than in Iceland. The most obvious divisions created by nationalism were within the small educated élite, between those who were conservative and careful in their demands from the government and the more impatient younger generation. The latter were on the whole liberal in political matters and better informed about contemporary events in the rest of Europe. Although they differed in opinions, these two groups had enough in common, both socially and educationally, to be indistinguishable in several of their ideas and attitudes.

Not all divisions within this group stemmed directly from the influence of nationalism. The clergy, for example, had a long-standing grievance in the differences that existed within the profession, both in material conditions and status. Pastor Ögmundur Sívertssen (1799-1845) wrote a poem contrasting the different kinds of hospitality farmers offered to a wealthy and a poor clergyman. The essence of this poem was a condemnation of the deference to status and money that the poet felt prevailed in Iceland. Throughout the period there is some evidence of an ingrained deference to members of the established families, such as the Stephensens. This is of course particularly true of obituaries but was also present

among schoolboys. Pastor Jóhann Tómasson (1793-1865), was clearly flattered by his friendship with a member of this family. In one of his poems to his school friend Hannes Stephensen, Jóhann also demonstrates the importance of kinship and family status in nineteenth-century Iceland:

> Hannes öðlings amtmanni,
> Alin hábornum, valinn,
> Mig þú af minni tignum,
> Með ljúfu ástar-gjeði
> Tókst í vináttu trausta.
>
> (J.S. 600, 4to.)

Half a century later, Matthías Jochumsson betrayed his humble origins in his early correspondence to his close friend Steingrímur Thorsteinsson whose ancestry was very much above that of his own. By this time such reverence was expressed more subtly, but nevertheless remained very much a feature of social relationships throughout the century and beyond.

The most obvious social division in Iceland during this period was that which existed between the educated and the alþýða. Educated men tended to use the term to mean all those who had no formal education but often singled out the more prosperous farmer as considerably above the rest. Tómas Sæmundsson, discussing the franchise in 1835, was very critical of older crown officials who claimed that the alþýða did not possess the intelligence to take part in government. He accepted that most of the people lacked knowledge of politics but claimed "So virðast mér bændur hjá oss upplýstir, að brátt muni þeim skiljast hvað um er

að vera."[8] Jón Sigurðsson also seemed to feel that Iceland lacked a middle class which could form a responsible political nation in an independent Iceland. Like Eggert Ólafsson a century earlier, they envisaged that the farmer could take a place similar perhaps to that occupied by the burgher in Denmark - at least until the population increased substantially. In fact, some of Jón Sigurðsson's most loyal and consistent supporters were farmers of some means - or at any rate self-supporting. There were several poets among this group who spoke unambiguously for this "middle ground". Most notable, and perhaps the most representative, was Jón Hinriksson, a farmer in the North who was a staunch supporter of Jón Sigurðsson and believed firmly in increasing political democracy and in economic progress. His poetry shows him as forward-looking, but moderate in political matters. This is demonstrated not only by his participation in local politics but in his whole attitude: notably his careful modification of the "new" poetry and his commonsense attitudes on religous and moral issues. This is demonstrated in 1874 when Jón celebrated the millennium with a long poem. Although it strongly advocates co-operation, there is a greater stress on self-help. His condemnation of excess and complaining is particularly revealing:

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8 Fjölnir, I, 84.

Þrekleysi, viðsjá og þunglyndið svarta,
þrældóms hér einkennin festust við láð.
Þurfamannsreglan: að klaga og kvarta,
kann ei að stoða nær þrotin er dáð.
Hluttekning bræðra því mistreysta megum,
mæðist hún gjarnan og fellur í dá.
'Hjálpa þér sjálfur' - þann orðshátt vér eigum
'aðstoðar Drottins svo nýturðu bá'.

(Ljóðmæli, p.4)

The attitude in this poem contrasts sharply with the traditional reliance on charity and paternalism in the poetry of older poets such as Hjálmar Jónsson. Jón is not only critical of complaints about misfortunes and bad living conditions but sees this as a characteristic of a subjected people. The derogatory term þurfamannsreglan is contrasted to self-help, the ideal of Jón's perfect society. Although he appeals to religion and traditions, "þann orðshátt vér eigum", Jón's ideas about society were novel in the work of unschooled poets. He emphasises social relationships dependent not on "hluttekning bræðra", but on the ability of the individual to make his mark, unassisted, in society.

Another representative of new social attitudes was the poet and bookbinder, Brynjólfur Oddsson. Like Jón Hinriksson, Brynjólfur was a supporter and great admirer of Jón Sigurðsson and produced no less than six poems in his honour. His "Reykjavíkurbragur", a long poem praising the Icelandic capital, is particularly unusual. Written in 1850, shortly after Brynjólfur began his apprenticeship, the poem describes the capital in terms which belie the realities of the place as it then was. Brynjólfur saw

Reykjavík through the wide eyes of the country lad eager to experience new things and ideas. He admires the streets lit up in the evening, but teeming with life during the day when people go about their different occupations. He adores the new cathedral, the beautiful new organ and the music it produced. The high point of this marvel is the commercial activity - foreign ships in the harbour, farmers, customers and merchants haggling over prices. This vision of Reykjavík in the period is quite unique and no poet praised its virtues or gave it such an atmosphere until the twentieth century. The significance of the poem, however, is primarily its accord with the image Jón Sigurðsson must have had of the town in the future. He saw a commercial and cultural capital as necessary for an independent Iceland, and he therefore opposed the Romantic notion of re-establishing the Alþing at Þingvellir. In 1881 Steingrímur Thorsteinsson perceptively drew up a similar sketch of the town in a poem commemorating Jón's death.

Brynjólfur was perhaps one of Iceland's most characteristic unschooled liberals. In his "Iceland-poems" he always emphasised freedom and liberty, and in his royal tributes he praised the king primarily for accepting these principles. By the same token he deplored excess and unconstitutional means of achieving better conditions. In his poem, "Uppreist Íslendinga 1849-50", he condemns the irrelevant efforts the Icelanders made in the way of physical protest - namely the pereat, which was a

breakdown of order in the grammar school, and the demonstration against Grímur Jónsson, the amtmaður in the North. Always ready to deplore oppression, Brynjólfur was nevertheless very critical of those who used physical force, even in a just cause. The men who Brynjólfur most admired and looked up to were those who combined liberal views, formal education and authority. One suspects that these were regarded by the poet as the "natural rulers" or leaders of the country. Not surprisingly, Brynjólfur said nothing favourable about the French Revolution since he sometimes referred to the arrogance of those who took the law into their own hands. In his "Annálskvæði 1870", he welcomed the surrender of Napoleon III but deplored the violence which made his defeat possible:

> ógurleg styrjöld Frakka frón,
> fremur drápgjörn en hungrað ljón,
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.117)

The rest of the poem implicitly praises the Icelanders' political and social passivity.

The unschooled poet of the poorer sort usually gave the term alþýða a much more specific meaning than did educated people. For such as Hjálmar and the itinerant poets and "folk scholars", the alþýða was the employed farm labourer, the fisherman and the poor crofter. These were people of a mean status in Icelandic society whose ideas were sometimes idiosyncratic and private, yet in

whose obscure and sometimes woolly poetry there are to be found coherent social principles. By the mid-century, the bulk of this group of poets felt very strongly that the alþýða was severely restricted by the law and by social injustice. Only a few, however, appear to have formulated this feeling into a clear expression, a stance for their "class" and against their governors. One of the most explicit examples of this was written in 1850 by Lýður Jónsson. The poem, "Lausamannsvísur", is a criticism of the conditions of workers without a firm contract with an employer - usually a farmer - a class of people who had few rights and laboured under medieval restrictions. Lýður was perhaps responding to some of the frequent criticism of this class, the lausamenn. In 1850 the subject of national freedom was a central issue in Icelandic politics, and probably contributed to Lýður's outrage at the conditions suffered by this relatively large group of workers. At any rate, the poem contrasts the slavery - þrældóms-band - suffered by the lausamenn with the dawn of freedom in national affairs. He stresses that power is inherent in numbers and in the combination of individuals. In spite of their poverty and insignificance the downtrodden can unite and rise:

> Þótt að jeg og aðrir eins
> eyði stund í fátækdómi
> hópur stór af hyrðum fleins
> heita meiga félagssómi.
>
> (Íb. 636, 8vo.)

Although the poem is characteristically cryptic, the message is clear: national freedom has opened up new

possibilities, everyone can have a significant voice in their own destiny if people join together:

> Ísa falar frelsis sið
> fagur morgun glansar nærri
> ættum þá ey vakna við
> og verða meður hópnum stærri?
>
> (Íb. 636, 8vo.)

Ideas of this nature were not expressed in poetry before the mid-century. Even Lýður's father, Jón Hákonarson - whose "Aldarháttur" is discussed in Chapter 8 - appears to have accepted social hierarchy unquestioningly.

Although many poets made similar connections between nationalism and social freedom, only a few wrote specifically on the subject. Stefán Einarsson, who collected poems by versemakers in the East of Iceland, found only one nineteenth century poet who wrote such a poem of any length. This was Einar Jónsson, a farmhand and a small-scale crofter. Written in the late thirties or early forties, the poem makes three basic points about the conditions and position of the landless worker. Placed at the outermost boundary of society, he is absolutely necessary to its well-being. His disappearance would mean social collapse:

> ef okkar væri allra misst
> í eymd er farsæld snúin
> hallast mundi hljóta fyrst
> húss og jarðar búin. 9

His second point is that the vital social role of the

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9 Austfirzk skáld og rithöfundar, p.142.

servant reaps a liberty equal to that of a dog - "frjáls sem hundur" - and a denial of ordinary human rights such as freedom to travel and marry when they see fit and so on. In short, they are no better placed than slaves who are bought and sold in the market-place. Thirdly, their everyday conditions are very mean and the rewards for their labours is sometimes hunger:

> Soltnir ganga sýnist mér
> við sauði og sláturteiga
> mörg því vistin misjöfn er
> og mögur goldin leiga 10

Many of the most severe social critics of the period were in fact the itinerant poets and farmhands - Helgi Árnason, Níels Jónsson and others. These men were accepted and tolerated in Icelandic society but they were usually outsiders who were considered peculiar in some way, or at least mildly eccentric. They had relative freedom and an unusual overview because of their travels. Helgi Árnason was one of the people who lived most of his adult life "on the road". His peculiar but harmless eccentricity enabled him to live outside the normal ways of society and yet keep a relative independence until his health failed a few years before his death in 1888. Materially his life was hard from the start and he clearly identified strongly with people without power and means, people who were forced to submit to the will of their

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10 Ibid.

betters. Helgi was profoundly religious and his poetry suggests an intimate knowledge of the Bible. He judged society from his reading of Scripture which was dominated by Luther's doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers". Some of his poetry expresses strong radical non-conformity in his harsh criticism of church and state. In an obituary published four years after his death it is claimed that Helgi's secrecy about his poetry stemmed from his fear of criticism.[11] It is, however, very possible that Helgi feared that his disapproval of all authority might work against him. Although he wrote poems to mark particular occasions - including a verse to the king in 1874 - most of Helgi's poetry turns into general speculations about morals and behaviour. As a traveller he depended a great deal on hospitality and when on one occasion he was denied shelter, he wrote a poem called "Mismunur á Guðs og manna dómum", contrasting the difference between the judgements of God and man. Many Icelandic poets, including Jón Mýrdal and Hjálmar Jónsson, wrote angry poems on similar occasions. Jón once took great exception to the lack of welcome he received in Viðey which boasted a stone house of Danish design with a large parlour. To be treated like a dog was an unacceptable degradation of human dignity, even to the poorest of poets:

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11 Ísafold, XIX, 1892, 191,211.

Viðeyjarstofa er víð og há,
- varla jeg þar frá sný -
hún var af mönnum heil full þá:
hana tveir kreistust í;
en sá þriðji og það var frá,
þar gæti rúmast frí;
en kaffibolla hundum hjá
hann úti lapti því.

(Grýla, p.152)

In contrast Helgi uses the opportunity to draw general conclusions about the equality of all men, and the divine punishment received by those who maltreat the poor. For him oppression of other human beings was a sign that the oppressor uses his fellows to gratify his lust for power. The final stanza produces the unschooled poets' favourite axiom on the subject of social inequality and injustice; in the sight of God all men are poor and unworthy:

Því allir mega aumingjar
í augsýn Drottins heita.

(Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

In his "Aldarháttur" Helgi adopts Eggert Ólafsson's style of social commentary - discussing the character of each social group in order of status. Although Helgi points out briefly that every group has individuals who do not display the general traits of the social class they belong to, the poem is a ferocious attack on those in a position to command other people. He identifies completely with the lowest sort, the labourers and small crofters. Yet he produces some of Eggert's criticisms of these people - namely the temptation to ape foreign habits and slackness in bringing up their children. But their

shortcomings are primarily due to the misguided teachings of those who set themselves up as rulers. Helgi's main concern may seem to be religion, as this takes up most of the space in over four hundred stanzas, but the only consistent thread is an attack on the various kinds of rulers in Icelandic society. These include not only government officials such as doctors and the clergy but landlords and farmers who employ labour; as he moves down the ladder his sympathy grows. He poses the question whether the alþýða have a duty to obey their superiors, the æðri:

> Skal þá reyna skylda rjett
> Í því hlýðnast umtalslaust,
> Yfirboða-stjett?

(Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

The answer must be no. The æðri do not follow the path to truth as outlined in Christ's teachings, thus the Children of God have no obligation to follow wordly rulers influenced by misguided principles. As so often, Helgi seems to be advocating a government by godly people:

> Oss það líf á liggur
> Ljóst það hver einn sjer
> Sá er hér að hyggur,
> Hvergi megum vjer
> Okkur láta leiða fet
> Yfirvöldin lífs af slóð
> Í myrkra-valds-net.

(Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

To highlight the condition in which the servants have to exist, Helgi is not particularly interested in material well-being. He goes back to the Golden Age when

the forefathers had stolen, bought and received human-beings as gifts, a most heinous crime against God and man. Helgi admits that he himself has never experienced slavery or maltreatment but as always his argument is general. The legacy of the past survives in the condition of the Icelandic servant:

> Þessa Sögu sannar,
> Sjást má dável það,
> Harðir Hólma fannar
> 'Húsbændurnir', að,
> Þriðjung fullan þjóðar hjer
> Stela undir ánauðar -
> Ok; það hver einn sjer.
>
> Þessi þræla lýður
> (þar til glögg fynn spor)
> Nefnist (svo áð síður
> Sjáist smánin vor)
> Af oss (já í einnig rjett
> vorri langt frá virðing hneppt)
> Vinnuhjúastjett.
>
> (Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

Helgi was well aware that this might not be accepted as a fair description of Icelandic society, and he pre-empts the accusation that his ideas were crazy or emotional:

> Athuga þeir ætti
> Ei hvort lagagrein,
> Núgildandi, fyndu frí,
> Sögu minnar sem fyrir
> Sönnum stæði í.
>
> (Lbs. 1516, 8vo.)

Helgi is clearly referring to the <u>vistaband</u>, a legislation which grossly restricted the freedom of people like himself, and which the working population had resented bitterly for more than a century. This law is one of the more concrete pieces of evidence of how little interest there really was in basic human rights in nineteenth-century

Iceland; the vistaband was reformed only in 1893, almost twenty years after the celebrations of 1874.

The tone and style of Helgi's "Aldarháttur" was becoming increasingly old-fashioned when he wrote it - probably in the late sixties or seventies. The fundamentalism of his religious beliefs and its use as a justification for a new social order was very much out of tune with the "new" poetry and contemporary religious ideas. His demand for equal rights, however, had become a popular theme among versemakers by the end of the period. Unlike Hjálmar Jónsson, the younger generation was not demanding charity from their betters. Moreover, the resignation that freedom could be achieved only after death was gradually disappearing with the generation who reached adulthood before the national awakening. In 1855 the first Icelandic mormons emigrated to Utah. Although few people left before the seventies, North America became for many a land of potential freedom from poverty and toil. Two poets who emigrated, Júlíana Jónsdóttir and Pálmi Jónsson, wrote poems explaining why they abandoned their beloved motherland. Before she left Iceland, Júlíana had written several poems where God seemed the only escape from poverty, hardship and the impossibility of realising any of her aspirations. The unpleasant occupation of cleaning eiderdown stimulated her to verse. The stifling surroundings became a symbol for the prison she felt she occupied:

Dimt er í dýflissu
dúns og svælu;
sit ég einmana,
súrnar í augum;
ramur reykur
rauna minna
þrýstir að brjósti
en þreytist höndin.

(Stúlka, p.10)

In this poem God provides the only comfort:

Á ég þó skjól
sem aldreigi bilar
þangað minn andi
þreyttur flöktir.

(Stúlka, p.11)

In 1874 Júlíana celebrated the millennium with an "Iceland-poem" which also served as a farewell to her country. She attacks those in power for their empty talk of unity and national celebration, when in reality they do nothing to prevent the nation being oppressed by a foreign government:

Það eru undur þjóðhátíð,
þínir synir eru að nefna,
baunverskan er láta lýð
lög þín brjóta og heit ei efna,
hans sem blóði blandnar veigar
bandingjanna glaður teigar.

(Stúlka, pp.5-6)

From the oppression of the nation she turns to the suffering of the people at the hands of their own countrymen. The "better sort", she argues, should be allowed to survive in society but not at the cost of the farmers who till the earth:

Höfðingjunum hlúðu að,
en hafðu ei til þess bænda sveita;
þeim góðu herrum bú þú það
af basli, sem kann hendur þreyta;
láttu þeirra hörund hitna.
hollt er þeim að mega svitna.

(Stúlka, p.5)

Júlíana was perhaps the only poet of the period to put forward the idea that the élite should be forced to suffer physical labour along with the rest of the population. Perhaps this was the greatest punishment she could envisage; she apparently loathed farm work, which she had to endure in order to support herself.

Pálmi Jónsson wrote his farewell to Iceland two years after the millennium. Like Júlíana, he resented what he saw as high-flown words uttered by Iceland's cultural and political leaders:

Þeir gjalla hátt með gráðungs raust
sem goðar þingum á
að frelsið verði látið laust
en landið uppreisn fá.

(Lbs. 2818, 8vo.)

In spite of all the shouting about freedom the alþýða remain oppressed, poor and without prospects for a better future:

Almúginn samt er ekki frjáls
og en þá kjennir meins
því flegin þikir húð af háls
og holdið inn til beins,
lifandi snauðir láta blóð
en lítið batna fer
því velsæld engin vex hjá þjóð
þó vaxi tollarnir.

(Lbs. 2818, 8vo.)

Thus he leaves with his companions to escape oppression and

poverty. Both poets ironically referred to their Norwegian ancestors who chose freedom in a new country rather than subservience at home:

> Fagurbúinn bíður knör
> börnum þínum við að taka,
> sem nú flýja hin köldu kjör
> og kveðju senda þjer til baka.
> Norðmenn flúðu á náðir þínar
> og Norðmenn sækja frændur sína.
>
> (Stúlka, p.7)

Unlike Júlíana, Pálmi made a direct reference to himself as a fugitive from oppression as well as poverty:

> Því förum nú sem frjálsir menn
> frá þér í Vesturheim,
> oss flytja þangað fleyin tvenn
> hvar fáum björg og seim.
>
> (Lbs. 2818, 8vo.)

In view of the Romantic nationalists' message that the Golden Age provided an example of how the Icelanders could become free people, high spirited and independent, there was a poetic justice in the emigrants' appeal to historical precedent.

PART FOUR

ICELAND AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD

CHAPTER 10

Towards New Directions

Although insularity, even chauvinism, was a feature in nationalistic poetry throughout the period 1830-74, it became gradually less pronounced as nationalism gained in strength. After the mid-century the work of the Danish-educated poets suggests that educated Icelanders were consciously searching for new and wider horizons, stimulated perhaps by a growing faith in an eventual dissolution of Danish rule. The possibility of independence clearly initiated a fresh look at other countries and a desire for greater communication with the outside world. This attitude is also reflected in contemporary periodicals, especially those published by the Icelanders in Copenhagen. This literature emphasised the importance of looking not only beyond Iceland, but also to countries outside Scandinavia.

From the Reformation until 1847, when a theological college was established in Reykjavík, the Icelanders had to go abroad to acquire higher education. Yet it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that Copenhagen began to

entice more than a handful of Icelandic students to its university. Between 1740 and 1780 fifty Icelanders graduated in theology; by 1870 thirty students had graduated in law.[1] There were also others who began a course of study which they never completed - notably Jónas Hallgrímsson and Gísli Brynjúlfsson. Before 1830 the number of Icelanders who went abroad was proportionately minute but increased gradually as communications with the outside world began to improve around the mid-century. Yet the great majority of people who went abroad in the period were educated men on official business and students.[2]

Until 1911 Iceland's only university was in Copenhagen, which was also the centre of government for the better part of the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly the most influential political and literary ideas in Iceland - especially from the thirties to the sixties - were formed by the "exiles" in the capital.

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1 Tíminn 20th July, IX, 1925, 132. See also Jón Helgason, Íslendingar í Danmörku, fyr og síðar (Reykjavík, 1931)

2 Several women travelled to Denmark, especially during the latter part of the period, in some cases probably to acquire cultural polish since there was no provision for formal education of women until 1874.
Some women went abroad to go into domestic service and others to seek medical help. There were also a number of Icelandic apprentices in Copenhagen during the period. Apparently very little is known about these people as a whole.

Influential periodicals, namely Fjölnir, Ný félagsrit and Norðurfari were published in Copenhagen and mostly written by Icelandic students and scholars. It is revealing that all the major þjóðskáld of the period - with the notable exception of Matthías Jochumsson - stayed on in Copenhagen for a number of years after they left the University. They wrote a number of nostalgic poems about Iceland, especially the landscape, where they expressed their longing to be back home. Jónas Hallgrímsson´s sonnet "Ég bið að heilsa" is one of the best known of these poems, albeit not particularly representative of the genre. Its mood is melancholy, almost sentimental, and conveys an emotional feeling for the motherland. It belongs to Jónas´s later work which tends to depict the gentler side of Icelandic nature. Its most characteristic feature is an emphasis on Iceland´s remoteness and the poet´s physical distance from the homeland.

Homesickness was not a new subject in Icelandic poetry. As a student in Copenhagen, Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal wrote a few poems about his wish to leave Denmark and return home. The best known of these is probably "Hafnarvelta", the archetypal complaint about the unwholesome weather and arrogant people in the capital. The novelty of later contributions to the genre was the nationalists´ concern with Iceland´s nature and its distance from other countries. One of the few older poets in the period to write about Iceland´s remoteness

was Jón Jónsson, who composed several long verses on learned topics, notably geography, astronomy and geology. One of these poetic tracts was called "Um vora veröldu útaf fyrir sig og hennar landaskipan" - a rather contrived title for geology and geography. It reflects a strong influence of the Enlightenment, particularly in its emphasis on information, and in the dry and unimaginative presentation of the subject-matter:

> Ísland kúrir utanliga
> ei mjög langt frá Norðurpól,
> segstíu og fimm vyrðist vega
> vera gráðum norðar sól.
>
> (Íb. 890, 4to.)

Probably written just after the turn of the century, the poem is totally devoid of emotional response to nature. It is a matter-of-fact statement recording the position of Iceland on the globe. The peculiar description kúrir utanliga is the only hint that the poet had any personal interest in Iceland's remote geographical location.

The Icelandic Enlightenment focused on narrowing the gap that educated men felt existed between their own circumstances and that of the more civilised Europeans. Returning from Copenhagen, they were forcibly struck by the backwardness of their compatriots. This condition they explained in a variety of ways most notably perhaps by Iceland's distance from the new inventiveness and progress surging forth in the major countries of Europe. At the same time many of these men felt a new sense of

patriotism, reflected particularly strongly in the poetry of Eggert Ólafsson. On one hand Eggert advocated economic progress, but on the other conservatism and national self-sufficiency, ideas that some of his less patriotic colleagues thought incompatible. Later this dichotomy became one of the paradoxes of nationalistic propaganda. Bjarni Thorarensen was the first poet to regard Iceland's remoteness as a profoundly important characteristic. This idea became influential later in the period, but few poets proclaimed isolation as a moral force with the same determination as Bjarni. The Romantic's admiration of the solitary and unapproachable, but fascinating, recluse became a permanent feature of the "exiled" poet's Iceland-image. In Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Magnúsarkviða" (1839-42) isolation is a quintessential element in Iceland's natural perfection. There is no longer any suggestion that remoteness from civilisation is a cause of social backwardness and poverty:

> Úti sat und hvítum
> alda faldi
> fjallkonan snjalla
> fögur ofan lög;
> sá hún um bláan
> boga loga
> ljósin öll, er lýsa
> leið um næturskeið.
>
> (Rit, I, 74)

In "Ísland", however, Jónas's idea of Iceland and the outside world contrasts sharply to that of Bjarni. He exalts the past partly because the forefathers had been able to relate easily and on equal terms with foreigners.

The next generation of Danish-educated poets continued to see positive aspects in remoteness and solitariness. They used these aspects to mirror the independence and purity they felt had endured in Icelandic nature - and therefore must also lie latent within the people. At the same time many of their poems convey the discomforts of isolation. In a patriotic poem written in 1862, Matthías Jochumsson adopts his first two lines from Jónas:

> Ein sit ég úti
> í unnar geymi
> nærri norðurhjara
> forn fjallkona
> faldin íshökli
> langt frá sólblíðu sumri.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.162)

Beginning with an emphasis on Iceland's solitary position in the far North, the poem reaches a climax in "langt frá sólblíðu sumri". Iceland is indeed different from Denmark's smiling shores - "brosandi land/ fléttað með sólhýrum sundum" - depicted by Matthías in 1874. Benedikt Gröndal, Steingrímur Thorsteinsson and Gísli Brynjúlfsson wrote a great number of poems where they depict Iceland as remote and solitary. Unlike Matthías, they lived in Denmark during the best part of the period from the mid-forties to the early seventies. In their poetry Iceland is thus viewed from a distance, and is sometimes particularly cold and uninviting. Steingrímur's poetry reflects the most marked preference for the pleasanter side of the Icelandic landscape and a tendency to sentimentalise rural life. Yet

his Iceland-image could be particularly comfortless. He even wrote a poem called "Á heimsenda köldum", where Iceland is alone on the northernmost periphery of human habitation:

> Á heimsenda köldum
> vor ey situr ein
> í yzta norðurhafsauga.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.11)

Although it was gradually adopted by poets at home, the image of Iceland as cold, remote and uninviting was created and developed by the poet in "exile". This vision of the motherland contrasted sharply with the other side of nationalistic nature poetry, which drew a gentle and colourful picture of a particular place or a type of landscape. It is perhaps a little ironic that the national poets - like most Icelanders - were acutely sensitive about foreigners' descriptions of Iceland as cold and hostile. Foreigners were clearly expected to keep within the etiquette of the visitor and simply admire the country's great past, its history and literature. Benedikt Gröndal, with characteristic fury, condemned foreign visitors' account of Iceland in a Danish periodical as "den urimeligste og ondskapsfuldeste sliddersludder, fordi de rejsende betragte alt med hovmod, forsto ikke et ord af landets sprog og bedomme alt efter de store stæder in den civileserede verden."[3] Yet at the same time the

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3 Antiquarisk tidsskrift, 1861-63, pp.363-64.

Danish-educated poets were unaware of how profoundly their own attitudes had been moulded by education and years of absence. Their Iceland-image reflects not only that they viewed the country from afar, but also to some extent like foreigners. There are some interesting parallels between the ideas of the "exiled" poet and the educated foreign visitor: "A remote desert" wrote William Morris in 1882, "such indeed is the land in spite of its beauty and romance."[4]

With the exception of Gísli Brynjúlfsson, the "exiled" poets wrote surprisingly little about foreign countries or peoples, and hardly anything about their own experiences abroad. Their poetry and translations, however, show an affinity with the other Nordic cultures. The Nordic origin of Iceland had been reinforced through the centuries, first by the union with the Norwegian Crown and subsequently by Danish rule. This inevitably isolated Iceland from countries outside Scandinavia. In the nineteenth century, Romanticism gave the Icelanders a new confidence in their culture which afforded an opportunity to compare their own history favourably with that of other nations. As the German and Scandinavian Romantics elevated the Northern race or spirit above the Greeks and Romans, the Icelanders attempted to raise their Golden Age above

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4 Daily News, 8th August, 1882.

the history of the other Scandinavians. This was a strong tendency in Bjarni Thorarensen's poetry, at least during his stay in Copenhagen. Yet Bjarni was very much in tune with the political and cultural climate which prevailed in Denmark during the Napoleonic wars. He also admired the new Danish literature, especially the poetry of Oehlenschläger who made much of the ancient North and the superiority of the Nordic character. These notions reverberated in Bjarni's poetry as it did in the work of many Scandinavian poets at the time. Although Bjarni was not a prolific translator, he turned into Icelandic Tegnér's poem, deriding the dead but haughty Latin language, with great conviction:

> Hreinn er þinn rómur og snjallur, sem stæltum samslái bröndum,
> hátt sem drottinsorð hermannlegt gellur þitt tal
> orðfátt, drambsamt og stirt, en úr gröfinni stýrir þú ennþá
> hálfri Evrópu, á því Rúmverinn sver sig í kyn.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, I,184)

The political climate in Denmark after 1830 was markedly different from the conservativism which prevailed during the previous decades. Moreover, by the thirties and late forties Icelandic students were passionately nationalistic and increasingly aware of political developments, not only in Denmark, but also in Europe. In their own work and translation they still identified with the Nordic culture as a whole, either directly or implicitly. Most of these poets had sympathies towards

Scandinavianism, a movement mainly organised by Nordic students. Jónas, for example, was moved to write a poem exalting Nordic brotherhood when the first major student congress met in Uppsala in 1843:

> Fundist hafa bræður
> við Fýrisá,
> faðmazt fóstbræður;
> tryggðum treystust,
> trausti bundumst
> synir samþjóða.

(Rit, I, 118-19)

In the sixties, Grímur Thomsen was still in favour of the political aspects of Scandinavianism. But by this time such ideas were seen by most of his younger countrymen in Copenhagen as a distrust of Iceland's ability to achieve and maintain complete political independence. Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, Gísli Brynjúlfsson and Benedikt Gröndal all expressed strong antipathy to Grímur's ideas on the subject. Surprisingly there is no evidence to suggest a similar dislike of Grímur's contemporary, Jón Thoroddsen, when he decided to fight with the Danish army in Jutland in 1848. The war stimulated interest in Scandinavian co-operation; even the traditional enemy of Denmark, Sweden, showed some sympathy with the war. But for the younger poets such as Gröndal and Gísli, such a step would have been unthinkable. Both were against the war on principle and privately rejoiced over Denmark's problems. Jón Thoroddsen's diary suggests that he volunteered for purely private reasons and that he had limited interest in the issues at stake. He naturally calls the other side "the enemy", but had nothing to say about the cause he was

fighting for, nor does he convey any animosity towards the adversary.[5]

The foreign literary interests of the "exiled" poets during the thirties and forties were above all Scandinavian and German. Jónas Hallgrímsson translated a few poems, mostly Danish and German as well as the beginning of Ossian's "Carric-Thura". He had a particular fondness for the popular Finnish Kalevala and the then little known H.C.Andersen. Grímur Thomsen, at this time more active as a critic and translator than as a poet, was among the first critics in Denmark to write about H.C.Andersen and show professional interest in modern Norwegian poetry. His translations also include poems by Oehlenschläger and the Finnish-Swedish poet Runeberg. Although it is often suggested that Jón Thoroddsen was influenced by Dickens or inspired by Sir Walter Scott, there is little evidence in his novels to support this view. Dickens's world, his characters and attitudes could hardly have been more alien to an Icelandic novelist. It is, however, plausible that Jón was influenced by the well-known Danish novelist Steen Steensen Blicher whom he met briefly during his service with the Danish army in Jutland in 1848. There are many similarities between the two writers, although Jón was very much a novice compared to Blicher. Gísli Thorarensen (1818-74) drew an inspiration from a Danish writer, the

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5 Sønderjydsk Årbog, 1938, pp.152-169.

dramatist Heiberg whom he knew personally and greatly admired. The dreadfully amateurish plays Gísli wrote during his years in Copenhagen were almost exclusively modelled on contemporary Danish drama.

Eighteenth-century Icelandic poets and translators were aware of literature and ideas outside Scandinavia. Before 1830 various English writers had been translated although mostly from Danish editions. These include Bunyan, Pope and Milton, but only the last two were published. Nevertheless, the most important non-Scandinavian influence in Iceland remained German; and even Milton's Paradise Lost was translated partly from Danish and partly from German. Grímur Thomsen, who studied contemporary European literature in Copenhagen, was something of an exception before the mid-century. It was probably to some extent because of his influence that English and French writers gained such general popularity among students at Bessastaðir.[6] Icelandic students in Denmark were initially influenced by German Romanticism primarily because this was popular in Copenhagen but fairly quickly, it seems, poets turned their attention more closely to the original works. A strong German influence is very clearly reflected in Fjölnir: in its first issue

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6 In 1884 Gísli Brynjúlfsson wrote to Gröndal that"Grímur Thomsen og er beggja okkar meistari og sjerdeilis minn Mentor að fornu fari" Sendibrjef, p.123.

the periodical carried a short story by Tieck, Der blonde Eckbert, which received such adverse reaction in Iceland that the editors felt obliged to explain why it had been included. They argued that the periodical was concerned with Iceland and thus it had a duty to introduce their compatriots to the world's best literature and ideas. Tieck, they claimed, was thought to be "einhvurt hið mesta skáld nú á dögum".[7] There is an obvious cultural bias in their great admiration of German poets and philosophers; Jónas, for example, was no less fond of Heine than he was of the ancient Icelandic writers. He, like many of his educated contemporaries absolutely adored Reisebilder and acknowledged his debt to the master in his "Annes og eyjar".

It could be argued that from the thirties onwards, Icelandic students were consciously seeking to expand their horizons beyond Scandinavia. This is reflected to some extent in the work of Grímur Thomsen and in the Romantics' experiment with new literary forms. Tómas Sæmundsson's European tour in 1832-34 also demonstrates an interest in the world outside Scandinavia and a search for new impression useful in Iceland's regeneration. Tómas was acutely aware of the fact that the world was changing and that change was occurring primarily in England and on the Continent. Denmark and Sweden, for centuries the dominant countries in the North, had lost all claim to influence in Europe and were moreover experiencing difficulty in keeping

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7 Fjölnir, IV, 1838, 8.

their predominance in Scandinavia. Such considerations were not as yet clearly argued in Iceland; but educated Icelanders, especially in Copenhagen, were beginning to describe Danish culture as dead or dying. "Danir eru nú að slokna" wrote Jónas Hallgrímsson in 1845, "svo sem eins og ljós, sem fuðrar upp af því vinnukona hefir gleymt að taka af því skarið" (Rit, II, 199). The Icelandic poets in Denmark were, however, strongly influenced by the prevailing cultural interests in Copenhagen. Like the educated Danes they read the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Ossian's poetry and some French literature. But on the whole they had limited interest in American literature, in Shakespeare, the English Romantics or the British literary traditions in general.

During the third quarter of the century, Icelandic poets in "exile" in Copenhagen may have complained about homesickness and Denmark's dreary landscape and unwholesome climate, but for all practical purposes they adjusted easily to life in the capital. Gísli and Steingrímur took Danish wives and enjoyed the many cultural advantages of Scandinavia's most international city. There is no evidence to suggest that Icelandic students were discriminated against because of their nationality, in spite of the fact that such claims were sometimes put forward. Gísli and Gröndal described their student life in a way which gives the impression that they worked hard only sporadically, and then primarily on subjects which

interested them. Letters and poems suggest that many students had nagging financial worries and a general apprehension about an uncertain future, but in the main they were better-off and led a more varied life than the majority of their compatriots at home. They were each after their own fashion, actively involved in the nationalistic struggle which had gathered momentum since Jónas Hallgrímsson's death in 1845. This is strongly reflected in their poetry which was predominantly concerned with their feelings towards their country, its nature, its problems, its past and its future; in fact the climax of Romantic nationalism in Icelandic literature.

Gísli Brynjúlfsson's diary from 1848 reflects many of the notions about Iceland and the outside world to be found in the work of Benedikt Gröndal, Matthías Jochumsson and Steingrímur Thorsteinsson. Gísli was an exceptionally emotional young man, prone to sudden changes of mood, a characteristic which also fits Matthías and Gröndal very well. But although these four poets had much in common both as writers and individuals and were at time intimate friends, they were not a closely knit group. Nor did they see themselves as representing the same movement and often wrote scathingly about each others work. Yet when a new generation of writers began to reject their ideas and values later in the century, they implicitly began to recognise that they had partaken of the same cultural experience. In Dægradvöl, although he was often very

critical of his friends, Gröndal implicitly portrays himself and his three colleagues as an integral part of a specific cultural epoch.

One of the themes in Gísli´s diary, and in his early work is a breaking of chains. By contrast, Jónas Hallgrímsson´s nationalistic message was almost exclusively concerned with an awakening, the need to view the past and thus the future with new eyes. This was the central theme in "Ísland" and "Gunnarshólmi" and a secondary theme in "Alþing hið nýja", the only one of his poems specifically advocating greater democracy for the Icelanders. The later Romantics differed from Jónas in the dwindling emphasis in their work on the relevance of the past as a model for the future. They moreover convey a desire to break the mould which placed Iceland firmly within the Nordic family of nations. This is reflected particularly powerfully in Gísli´s diary, both in direct references to Scandinavia and in his consistent efforts to learn about the rest of Europe - England in particular. He read British authors in preference to other literatures and often expresses irritation when he had to read a particular work in a Danish translation. He belittles Danish authors for their lack of imagination, simplistic attitudes and small-mindedness. Gísli was even contemptuous of the now aging Oehlenschläger, the great name of Danish Romanticism, whose interpretation of the heroic Nordic past he regarded as one colossal misunderstanding. Very similar attitudes

are to be found in the correspondence between Gröndal and Steingrímur. "Undur er jeg leiður á skáldskap Dana", wrote the latter in 1860, "þeir ættu öldungis ekki að yrkja; heimurinn gæti vel mist alt það sem þeir hafa orkt."[8] Even Matthías expressed the opinion in his correspondence that the Danes were rather useless as a people.

In their poetry, however, these poets expressed no hatred towards the Danes and only rarely derided their unspectacular landscape. Steingrímur in particular wrote with great affection about the gentle aspects of the Danish countryside, which he admitted missing once he returned home. On the few occasions when these poets contrast the two countries, they betray a lack of interest in the subject rather than the intense dislike found in earlier poems. Gröndal's reference to the Danes in a letter to Jón Guðmundsson perhaps sums up their general attitude: "Danir eru raunar persónuleg góðmenni, en pólitísk skítmenni."[9]

Matthías characteristically argued that animosity towards the Danes was uncharitable and futile. In 1874 he stressed that the Icelanders must now forget the

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8 Sendibrjef, p.19.

9 Ibid., p.9.

disagreements of the past and establish a new brotherhood between the two countries. He was the only one of the four _þjóðskáld_ to write a poem sympathetic to the plight of the Danes during the Schleswig-Holstein War:

> Vorir frændur Gorms á Grund
> griða hvergi beiða,
> benjavönd við bana stund
> báðum höndum reiða.
>
> (_Ljóðmæli_, p.134)

Most Icelanders in Denmark apparently resented being branded as Schleswig-Holsteiners but nevertheless expressed grim satisfaction when Denmark fared badly in the war. In 1848, when his friend Jón Thoroddsen was fighting in Jutland, Gísli remained passionately hostile to the Danish side. He was elated when he learnt that in the British Parliament Palmerston had argued against coming to Denmark's aid. He also felt that it was hard to believe that a Briton, Disraeli, could entertain the idea of supporting a side quelling the freedom of minorities.

Gísli's diary reflects very well the "exiled" Icelanders' desire to hate an adversary, yet their lack of impressive reasons for disliking the Danes as people. He saw himself as a revolutionary and personally identified with the cause of nationalists fighting for freedom elsewhere in Europe. As an Icelander, he felt somewhat of a rebel without a cause. Danish rule, he admitted in _Norðurfari_, had never been an immediate or a directly cruel oppression but resembled a slow debilitating disease. Already in 1848 he claimed that Icelandic nationalists

must hate the Danes but often felt himself that this was difficult to achieve. This dilemma was forced on him during a visit to a Danish factory owner in a small town outside Copenhagen. The sweetness of the Danish summer and the lovely landscape combined with excellent hospitality, made Gísli muse, "þungt er mér stundum að verða að hata Dani, en það eru forlög mín."[10]

Matthías, who stayed only about two years altogether in the capital during the period, was the most Scandinavian-orientated of the group. Nevertheless he was against a strong political union with the rest of the Nordic nations. A very negative response to Scandinavianism separates this generation of bjóðskáld from their predecessors. Steingrímur, for example, was uncharacteristically emphatic in his opposition to a move in this direction. This, he clearly felt, would mean that Iceland's position as a pauper among the Nordic nations was strengthened and made irreversible. None of the four poets expressed a particular affection for any one of the Scandinavian cultures. Unschooled poets in particular were much more enthusiastic about the Icelanders' Norwegian origin, which was the subject of several of their poems. Here the Norwegians are presented as brothers and kinsmen and Norway as a second motherland. Similar sentiments open a poem which Matthías wrote on his visit to Norway

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10 Dagbók, p.254.

in the early seventies:

> Mér finst ég sjái móður minnar móður,
> ég málið þekki, svip og alla drætti;
> hér ómar allt af helgum hörpu-slætti,
> ég hlusta til, af djúpri undran hljóður
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.150)

A reverential tone is reserved for the country itself, but although there is no animosity, the tone of the poem has changed perceptibly by the last stanza:

> Ó, Norðmenn, frændur grimt er gæfuleysið,
> þér gulduð líka margra æskusynda;
> en skal oss eina auðnuleysið binda,
> er áfram þér með risafetum geysið
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.151)

Matthías clearly felt disappointed that the Norwegians had ignored their kinsmen in Iceland, in spite of the fact that they had come a long way since separating from Denmark in 1814.

In the early nineteenth century the Norwegians had developed a strong nationalist movement which looked back to their medieval history - preserved primarily in Icelandic writing notably in Heimskringla. Not surprisingly Norwegian historians, such as P.A.Munch and R. Keyser claimed a share in this literature, yet officially at least showed limited interest in Iceland or its struggle for independence. After the mid-century, Icelanders in Copenhagen often convey a sense of being rejected by a natural ally. This was a sentiment expressed by Gröndal, writing to a friend from Belgium in 1859:"Þó Norðmenn sjeu langt frá Íslendingum, þá myndi jeg helst vera í

sambandi við þá, því þeir eru skyldastir okkur hvort sem er, en það er það versta, sem er 'sikkert', að þeir kæra sig ekkert um okkur."[11] In his autobiography, however, Gröndal mentions the angry reaction of Icelandic students in Copenhagen when they read an article by Munch which, in Gröndal's words, was a "tilraun til að svipta okkur fornritunum."[12] It is perhaps some evidence of a difference in attitude between the younger and the older generation that Brynjólfur Pétursson (1810-51) - one of the editors of Fjölnir - was apparently a little irritated when the students openly pilloried Munch, then a very respected historian. Brynjólfur himself wrote anonymously in Danish papers more politely objecting to the article. After his visit to Norway, Matthías referred several times to the Norwegians with a dislike rather uncharacteristic of his usual comments about foreigners. They are described as unfriendly, difficult or inflexible, and in a letter of 1874 to Jón Sigurðsson, where he writes about the necessity to establish a civilised attitude towards the Danes, he concludes that "heldur ekki er mér um að predika um fjarskalegt dálæti við Noreg."[13] Although the

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11 Sendibrjef, pp.103-4.

12 Dægradvöl, p.136.

13 Bréf, p.195.

four poets translated works by Swedish and Finnish writers, these countries are hardly mentioned in their poetry. The main exceptions are poems written to greet foreign visitors to Iceland in 1874. Iceland's nearest neighbours to the East, the Faroese, were almost completely ignored in Icelandic literature during the period.

Throughout his diary, Gísli was severely critical of Danish literature and culture. He did not compare the Danes with Icelanders, but discussed Denmark in the context of larger and more developed countries. When contrasted with the previous generation of poets, even the Fjölnir-group, Gísli appears to have had an unusually international outlook. His work is anything but parochial and reflects an interest in the future of mankind, which in 1848 he felt to be hinged on the outcome of the conflicts in Europe in that year. In "Júníbardaginn in Parísarborg" he expressed the hope that a new spirit of defiance against oppression was being born among the nations and the workers:

> Svo fór víg, á vorri öld
> er var hið fyrsta heims með þjóðum,
> þegar reyndu að gjalda gjöld
> gullmæringum seima fróðum
> verkamenn - en verða má,
> að vakni enn þaðan Hildar þrá.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.65)

Although before the year was out, he was to become disillusioned with France as an agent of change, Gísli continued to look for signs of ideas that would fundamentally alter human societies. His interest in

foreign countries was much less influenced by the needs of Iceland than was usual among his compatriots. Yet his attitude was by no means out of tune with that of most educated Icelanders during the third quarter of the century. This is demonstrated not only in contemporary ideas but also in the absence of some of the more parochial notions of the early nationalists.

Although ideas based on the concept of a "natural culture", with its implicit racial overtones, left its mark on Icelandic poetry and attitudes, by the mid-century it had little relevance to the "exiles" in Copenhagen. Ný félagsrit demonstrates a consistent reaction against parochial nationalism - manifested in poetry by notions such as the North versus the South. In 1845, an article on nationality stressed that an international outlook was essential to a nation's health.[14] On the whole, the periodical consciously attempted to put Iceland's relations with foreigners into a perspective by condemning insularity and self-imposed isolation. Issues such as freedom of trade - achieved in 1854 partly through the efforts of Jón Sigurðsson - were discussed in a context of future relationships with foreigners. In Svava Gísli raised the subject of North versus South even more explicitly, disagreeing completely with those who "vilja gjöra svo mikin mun á 'rómönskum' þjóðum, sem þeir kalla,

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14 Ný félagsrit, V, 1845, 1-21.

og 'germönskum'".[15] The most admirable characteristics of the ancient Scandinavians, it is asserted, have long ago been passed on to the French and the English, who now resemble the Nordic forefathers more closely than the Danes. Inadvertently Gísli discards the central concept of the earlier Romantic nationalists, including both Jónas and Bjarni, that the language carries the national soul from one generation to another.

Although he frequently alluded to Nordic heroism and myths in his poetry, Gröndal apparently disliked the idea of a "northern man". In an article included in his first book of poems in 1853, he argued that the effects of a universal education would be to encourage man's faculty to reason and reduce his aggression. Once conflicts between individuals become an exception rather than a rule a world federation of nations is feasible. Although Gröndal did not envisage the destruction of nationality he was thinking along lines which contradicted the world view of earlier nationalists including Bjarni Thorarensen and Jónas Hallgrímsson. These were not, however, the most important ideas dominating the group's thinking. They still wrote typical "Iceland-poems" and patriotic nature poetry without any hint of internationalism. Yet attitudes to the outside world and to Iceland's place within it were gradually acquiring greater sophistication and complexity.

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15 Svava, p.vi.

As late as the eighteen-eighties, Gröndal wrote a poem where he appears to be answering Bjarni Thorarensen's half-a-century old question about Iceland's position among other nations:

> Sæla vex í suðri,
> sæmd í vestri,
> nám í austri
> en í norðri þrek -
>
> (Kvæði, p.16)

The world is no longer divided into North and South with perhaps a vague reference to an exotic unknown East. Gröndal's emphasis is on exciting and unchartered possibilities. No longer is the future limited and confined within the motherland, its nature and history:

> hvort sér þú eigi,
> in himinfædda
> að þér áttir allar
> opnar standa?
>
> (Kvæði, p.1)

There is no guidance as to how a new direction can be chosen. The emphasis is on the present as a time for change and an exploration of new venues rather than old. This feeling is epitomised by Steingrímur's "Vorhvöt": "Byrg eyrun ei lengur fyr aldanna straum." This contrasted very clearly with the certainty with which Jónas advised his countrymen to look to the past and to nature in order to discover the national spirit as well as solutions to the problems of the day.

One reason why Icelandic poets in Copenhagen were increasingly interested in countries outside Scandinavia

was undoubtedly the improved communications with the rest of Europe. Many Icelanders in Denmark travelled to the Continent and Britain, sometimes staying abroad for months or years. The correspondence of Icelanders in Copenhagen shows that many of them avidly followed political events in Europe. Although Germany continued to provide an important literary influence there was a new interest in the English speaking cultures. This is not only reflected in poetry but also in increasing references to these countries in letters and periodicals. In a letter from Rome, published in Ný félagsrit, Guðbrandur Vigfússon asserted that the Icelanders should look towards their neighbours, the Irish, rather than seek "uppsprettu allrar visku í kringum Eystrasalt eins og þeir hafa gert um nokkrar aldir."[16] The Irish may have had some romantic aura for Icelandic nationalists because of their place in the Sagas. Gísli often wrote about Ireland, notably in his poem "Írland". Translations also show, if not a disregard of Scandinavian and German literature, then certainly a new interest in English poetry and drama.

Before the late forties, the grammar school at Bessastaðir gave instruction primarily in the classical languages. Yet many students were able to read several modern languages. This is not surprising in a country where few books were published, and knowledge of a variety

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16 Ný félagsrit, XIIV, 1858, 142.

of subjects depended on an ability to read a modern language. Educated Icelanders often learnt Danish and German when they were quite young. In Iceland moreover translating was a traditional pastime, especially among clergymen. Although Romanticism stimulated an interest in contemporary German literature and thus the language, from the forties onwards French and English became perhaps equally popular among students in the grammar school. By 1848, for example, Gísli had clearly acquired considerable fluency in reading English and French. His diary suggests, however, that at the time he showed a very strong preference for literature in English and often searched second-hand bookshops for particular works he had heard about or read in translation. He read English newspapers and periodicals and even followed political events in Britain with consuming interest. Although he admired Jónas Hallgrímsson and was influenced by his work, Gísli criticised Fjölnir for concentrating too much on German ideas: it was, he argued, altogether too Heinean or French.

It is possible that Gísli was influenced by Þorvaldur Guðmundsson Repp (1794-1857), a remarkable linguist who worked for eleven years as a librarian in The Advocates Library in Edinburgh. Repp was by then a confirmed anglophile as well as fanatically anti-Danish. The two men met frequently in 1848, and Gísli records several occasions when they pointedly derided Denmark with obvious mutual pleasure. During the year Gísli read numerous

British authors, notably Byron, Scott, Burns, Thomas Moore and, with some difficulty, Shakespeare. In contrast he makes very few references to the favourite German authors of the previous generation. Gísli's admiration for Britain stemmed not only from his love of literature, but also accorded well with ideas about English political institutions which had prevailed in Scandinavia since the eighteenth century - and often appeared in the Icelandic press. In comparison with France, Britain was seen to be free from the internal conflict caused by an imbalance in the power structure.

By the end of 1848 Gísli doubted whether the imminent changes he had expected would follow from the events in France during the previous summer could happen in Europe. In March he borrowed Guizot's biography of Washington from Jón Sigurðsson, which impressed him greatly and awakened his interest in North America. In August, a meeting with some wealthy Americans who had sailed from New York to Denmark was recorded in a long entry in his diary, concerned mainly with freedom:

> Nú hafði eg nóg tækifæri til að horfa á veifu Norður-Ameríkumanna, og frá því eg fyrst, þegar eg var barn, sá litaðan uppdrátt af henni, hefur hún dregið mig að sér, því mér hefur þótt hún sem fagur gróðrardagur á vori og er ei líka land hennar sem græðandi vor heimsins? 17

The last entries dwell on Gísli's disappointment with the aftermath of the Revolutions: "Og mér finnst ekkert að

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17 Dagbók, pp.255-56.

berjast fyrir, en þá er Washington huggarinn."[18] More than ten years later he wrote "Sækonungar og Englendingar" in which he condemns the English for ignoring the struggles and fate of mankind - undoubtedly a reference to British isolationist policy in regard to Europe. The poem was written in the same year that Gísli visited England and reflects his disappointment on seeing a great nation stooping to self-interested materialism:

> Veður uppi öldin gaura,
> enska þjóðin tínir seim,
> tætir ull og telr maura -
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.325)

The last two stanzas shift attention to the West where a hope for mankind is being born in an emerging nation:

> Annars þangað vendum vonum,
> í Vestrheimi, þar sem enn
> magnast þjóð, er manna sonum
> mun að réttu veita senn.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.325)

Gísli's affection for Britain, however, remained strong; and he acknowledges its legacy to North America in a footnote to the poem where he quotes the philosopher George Berkeley: "my country's spirit walks another world".

Nevertheless the þjóðskáld were not passionately interested in the New World, nor were they generally familiar with American literature - except perhaps Washington Irving who was for some reason very popular in Denmark. Their education and cultural background predisposed them towards Europe. As nationalists, they

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18 Dagbók, p.274.

wrote scathingly about emigration when it began to take a serious toll of the Icelandic population in the early seventies. Moreover, Gísli's intermittent concern with North America derived almost exclusively from his interest in foreign affairs and his ideals of human freedom. By contrast, Gröndal's optimism about a new kind of future, so prominent in his work during the forties and fifties, gradually lapsed into a morose antipathy towards foreign technology and inventions which he felt contradicted the supremacy of the human spirit. He had a very limited interest in America and apparently regarded it with some apprehension. In 1859 he wrote that "Í Ameríku er svo mikið samsull af öllu, þar eru meir en þúsund trúarbragðaflokkar."[19] It is impossible nevertheless to describe Gröndal as parochial or narrow-minded even in his later years; but his vision of a more perfect world was too inconsistent and idiosyncratic to have much relevance in a poor and economically backward country. Matthías on the other hand continued to look outward and maintained an evangelical approach to progress. Not surprisingly he remained a great traveller into old age, and adapted easily to a changed world; he was the only one of these four poets to visit the USA, and lived long enough to fly in an aeroplane.

All four poets were at one time or another passionately enthusiastic about a particular non-Scandinavian

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19 Sendibrjef, p.102.

culture, for example, ancient Greece, Ireland, England and Germany. As they looked at the world outside Iceland, they were not searching for practical knowledge which could benefit their country materially - the main aim of their predecessors. In North America Steingrímur clearly felt he had discovered a country which deserved the language and imagery of the "Iceland-poem". A country where human qualities were nobility; a country without kings and slaves:

> Til foldar, þar heiðríkt skín frelsisins ljós,
> Þar finnast ei kóngar né þrælar,
> Þar manndáð er aðall og atorkan hrós,
> Sem ein gerir þjóðirnar sælar.

(Ljóðmæli, p.52)

For Steingrímur at least, North America could offer many of the characteristics central to the quest of Icelandic nationalists by the mid-nineteenth century. It moreover could be associated with the ancient Icelanders:

> Nú syngur og klingir hin fagnandi fjöld,
> Því fundið er landið hið horfna;
> Hið forna Vínland er vinaland nýtt,
> Frá vörum íslenzkum hljóma skal títt.

(Ljóðmæli, p.53)

Written in 1879, the poem was addressed to a group of American visitors and reflects very forcefully the sentiments of the late Romantics in the period from the fifties to the seventies:

> Þá bugar ei neyðin, ef hugur er hár,
> Vér hugsum að lifa, en ei tóra,
> Þann úrkost á sá, sem í örbirgð er smár
> Að unna því göfuga og stóra;

(Ljóðmæli, p.52)

The poem expressed an important sentiment of the Romantic nationalists in Iceland: the need to possess high ideals which transcended the backwardness and lack of beauty in contemporary society. During the latter half of the period the "exiled" poets had a desire to be great poets writing about universal themes and discovering significant truths about man. But they could not address themselves to a like-minded audience. As Steingrímur pointed out to Gröndal in the fifties:

> Íslendingar eru svo stutt á veg komnir, að þeir skilja ekki það, sem er fagurt, og hvernig skyldi vera von á því þar sem alt publicum er almúgamenn. Það er bölvun allra gáfaðra Íslendinga, að hið húsgangslega ástand landsins stendur þeim fyrir öllum þrifum, svo að þeir njóta sín ekki og verða annaðhvort að rita á öðrum málum eða öldungis ekki að rita. 20

Undoubtedly one of the reasons why the second generation of Romantic poets tried so consistently to look towards new directions was their difficulty in accepting the cramped intellectual conditions Iceland offered.

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20 Ibid., pp.19-20.

CHAPTER 11

The View from the Homeland

The technological revolution, which transformed communications in the rest of Europe, had very limited impact in Iceland until the twentieth century. In the period 1830-74 even the most basic road-work remained a much discussed but an insuperable problem demanding financial output, knowledge and manpower which the country could not provide. Harbour and port facilities were virtually absent until the twentieth century; the first lighthouse was built in 1878 and the first suspension bridge in 1891. The quickest way to travel was by sea, in spite of the fact that the bulk of the Icelanders' fleet consisted of small open boats - between two and three thousand of four oars or less - and a slowly growing number of larger deckboats.[1] The former were mostly owned by farmers who supplemented their income by fishing, whereas the latter, owned largely by merchant entrepreneurs, became the first successful capitalist enterprise in Iceland. Throughout the period, communications with the

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1 Frá einveldi til lýðveldis, pp.79-80.

outside world were in the hands of foreigners, i.e. traders and the Danish government. By the end of the eighteenth century a yearly postal service had been established between Copenhagen and Iceland. When steamships began to be used in the mid-fifties, the service increased to six journeys a year including one to and from Liverpool. Although the postal service and travel thus very gradually became less cumbersome, communications remained difficult and uncertain throughout the period. As late as 1879 it took two months before the news of Jón Sigurðsson's death in Copenhagen reached his countrymen in Iceland.[2]

Poetry suggests that the Icelanders had different ideas about communications and about their country's isolation from the outside world. All educated Icelanders, whether they had been abroad or not, possessed certain familiarity with the European intellectual tradition. They were schooled in the Classics, grammar, geography, mathematics and so on, and many acquired at least a reading knowledge of several modern languages. This provided a useful background for absorbing foreign news and ideas, and gave access to information which was not available to the rest of the population. Some clergymen may have been conscious of belonging to the European community of learned men as is demonstrated in accounts of educated visitors to Iceland. Travellers such as Ebenezer

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2 Helgi Valtýsson, Sögubættir landspóstanna (Akureyri 1942), I, 9.

Henderson found good conversation in several parsonages and had no real problem in communicating with the average pastor.

There is evidence to suggest that many of the unschooled poets used in this study were able to read Danish and that some were fluent readers of all the Scandinavian languages. Although several of them were surprisingly well read in history and literature, their knowledge tended to be rather unsystematic. Those who were lucky enough to work for educated people, or for well-off farmers who owned books, did have access to a modest library. The Icelanders' mania for copying down entire books, articles and rímur indicates, however, a chronic shortage of reading material. The work of unschooled poets often included references to foreign countries, peoples and literature. Such references were usually influenced by a poet's personal circumstances and cultural background, but on the whole reflect an intelligent interest in the outside world. Sometimes the unschooled poet's view of foreign countries appears rather quaint, a feature which may well have influenced Jónas Hallgrímsson's humorous piece about Queen Victoria's visit to the King of France and Benedikt Gröndal's Heljarslóðarorusta. Although the rímur were increasingly seen as a rather archaic form of literature, they sometimes show the unschooled poet's desire to move with the times. Many rímur-poets used foreign contemporary

material, both fact and fiction; some even tried to combine entertainment with news from abroad by composing rímur from reports in the press.

In the latter part of the period the Danish-educated poets tended to see Iceland's isolation in terms of its distance from the intellectual culture of Europe. "Land vort liggur afskjekkt og lángt út úr hinum menntaða heimi", wrote Jón Hjaltalín from Scotland in 1867.[3] Their educated compatriots at home, who were for the most part clergymen, often conveyed a similar attitude in their poetry. After graduating, those who were poor and without influential family connections were forced to accept the first available parish or take up posts as private tutors, while their better-off friends went abroad. Several years in the company of contemporaries in the grammar school and in the theological college - established in 1847 - made many of these young men dissatisfied with a future in a remote parish. The work of Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson, a pastor in the West of Iceland, suggests that he never accepted this fate. In various poems he enumerates the disadvantages of serving in a poor and remote parish. One of his later poems draws attention to the utter irrelevance of book learning to the life of the poor farmer-pastor working in a sparsely populated part of the country:

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3 Ný félagsrit, XXV, 1867, 20.

Skemtanir skjaldfengnar mjög,
sem skáld eða fræðimenn gleðji
veitast mér Vestfjörðum á,
Búskaparhug jeg ei hef
og hvað dugir bóknámið eintómt
öðlist menn útkjálkabrauð
þar sem að örbyrgð og eymd
í erviðislaunin vjer fáum
óþökk og unaðarskort?

(Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

Lack of news and an opportunity to pursue academic or literary interests were perhaps the most immediate grievance voiced by young clergymen in this period. When he served in a poor parish during the sixties, Matthías Jochumsson often mentioned his isolation from like-minded people. In a letter to Steingrímur Thorsteinsson, he described his parishioners with warm affection and characteristic humour as "forn og fákunnandi þjóð, óbreytt af glysi nýrra tíma og hver öðrum fullkomnari rustikus",[4] Similar complaints were occasionally expressed earlier in the century. The pastor at Hestur in Borgarfjörður, Jóhann Tómasson, who graduated in 1816 wrote several poems about the boredom and isolation of his parish:

Ólund kvalinn eiri lítt,
ekkert ber til frjetta nítt,
í afkima þessum þrimur,
þrauta sama böl og kvöl.

(Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

The word "afkimi" conveys perfectly the feeling of confinement conveyed in several letters and poems written by clergymen.

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4 Bréf, p.50.

Another common subject in the poetry of the young clergyman was his frustrated desire to go abroad to study. In his poem "Næturvakan" Jóhann Tómasson realised his dream momentarily, only to have it shattered by the cold reality of his position:

> Þegar skip um saltan sjó,
> sé eg með seglum prídd
> strax eg með þeim far skal fá.
> Finn eg skjótt að allt mun sig jafna.
> .....
> Tilbúinn að öllu er.
> Æ fátækt þú heldur mér,
> kemst eg ekki frá þér eitt fet
> ferðin er búin hér basla hvað get.
>
> (J.S. 600, 4to.)

Although he was born in 1834, nearly forty years after Jóhann, Guðmundur was no nearer realising a similar ambition. He wrote several poems about his bitter disappointment at the prospect of spending his life in a remote parish. His desire to go abroad was confided to a more fortunate friend, Júlíus Havsten, who was then a student in Copenhagen. The tone of the poem is one of intimacy sharpened by absence, which is very characteristic of the correspondence between close friends from the grammar school. By this time the life of a student in Copenhagen was clearly attractive to a young Icelander:

> Svo langt á milli okkar er
> að aldrei getum talað saman.
> Ó, hvað það væri ástvin gaman
> að sitja í Höfn við hlið á þér.
>
> (Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

But for Guðmundur, as for most clergymen in his circumstances, the desire to go abroad was a financial impossibility:

Fjeskortur hindrar fúsan hug
á fagra Sjálands grund að vitja
einbúi fastur jeg má sitja
þótt andinn þreyti ferðaflug.

(Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

The work of the unschooled poets reflects a rather different attitude to the outside world. Even Sigurður Breiðfjörð and Jón Mýrdal who had spent several years in Copenhagen expressed no desire to travel abroad, least of all in order to enjoy cultural riches or to find intellectual stimulation. Although Breiðfjörð had been given a second chance to study, the advantages open to educated Icelanders abroad were not available to most unschooled poets. There was perhaps also a certain class division within the Icelandic community in Copenhagen; suggested partly by the relative absence of references to apprentices in the correspondence and autobiographical material written by students. Until 1874, when many unschooled poets borrowed ideas from the patriotic poetry of the <u>þjóðskáld</u>, imagery of loneliness and seclusion is rarely to be found in their "Iceland-poems". Thus Símon Bjarnarson's "yzt í norðurheimsins höfum / hátt gnæfandi jökuldrós" is derived directly from Benedikt Gröndal and bears little resemblance to Símon's more characteristic pastoral imagery. More original poets such as Brynjólfur Oddsson and Hjálmar Jónsson reflect a similar influence, but at the same time they produced variations on the theme which suggest a different attitude from that of the Danish-educated poets. Thus Brynjólfur's "því nálægt

heimsins norðurskauti / valdi oss bústað vís forsjón" does not evoke the characteristic melancholy of the poet in "exile". The tone of the poem conveys a simple acceptance and a lack of interest in the subject. Celebrating the millennium, Hjálmar Jónsson gave Iceland a voice which echoes his own bitter resentment in the face of poverty and injustice. Thus presented as an outsider, Iceland expresses a desire to follow its king to better shores:

> Fegin eg vildi fylgja þér,
> faðir, um bláa storðar hringa;
> eg má um aldir hírast hér
> og haföldur láta á mér springa.
>
> (Ritsafn, I, 16)

Hjálmar apparently saw no attraction in Iceland's remoteness from other countries. Nor did he emulate the Romantics' imagery, exalting solitariness.

References to the press and communications in poetry and private correspondence reveal that unschooled poets were not particularly concerned with isolation. Different kinds of sources convey the general excitement in Iceland when a post vessel or a trading ship arrived from abroad. Such an event was an important occasion in a period when the ships came only in spring, summer and early autumn. For Matthías Jochumsson and many of his educated contemporaries, the months in between were a time of twilight "enda leggst nú flest í dá".[5] After a hard winter

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5 Bréf, p.29

accompanied by shortages of cereals, salt and other necessities, the arrival of the ships was awaited with impatience by all. The fact that Copenhagen was Iceland's capital and the place where political decisions were taken was moreover an important reason why politically committed Icelanders felt particularly isolated. From its revival in 1845 to the end of the period, the Alþing sat only for a few weeks every other summer; and some of its members, including Jón Sigurðsson, resided in Denmark. Thus the ships not only brought necessities and news from abroad, but also the latest developments in the debate with the Danish government. Unlike their unschooled compatriots, the educated often expressed strong awareness of their confinement and distance from the mainstream of events in Europe. This is particularly true of letters to friends in Denmark, and is reflected very vividly by Páll Melsteð (1812-1910) in a letter to Jón Sigurðsson in 1849:

> löngir eru vetur hér á landi bróðir minn, hvaða ráð er til að stytta þá? Það má reyndar fá sér eitthvað til að gjöra, en það er þetta sem mér þykir lángt, að ekkert fréttist frá því í október og til sumarmála; það er helmingurinn af árinu. Allur verður maður öðruvísi á því að vera að staðaldri í þessari fjærveru og þögn, sem hér er, heldur en úti í löndum í öllum þeim hávaða, sem þar er. Hér situr maður fram við sjó og heingir fæturna fram af hömrunum og rær dag út og dag inn og gónir út til hafs, að vita hvort eitthvað komi ekki í augsýn. Von er þó að við séum kindarlegir í annara manna augum. 6

Although in retrospect the improvements in

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6 Bréf til Jóns Sigurðssonar (Copenhagen, 1913), p.94

communications in Iceland seem to have been painfully slow during the period, many contemporaries expressed a different view. In districts such as the islands of Breiðfjörður - where travel was always relatively easy because of the sea - local people regarded the introduction of deck-boats as a great advance. Similarly, several unschooled poets were clearly very impressed by the growing number of periodicals and twice-monthly newspapers such as Norðri and Þjóðólfur. In spite of the fact that they arrived late and carried news that were sometimes a year old, these publications may well have been generally regarded as a close link with other districts and the outside world. Commenting on the abundance of news reaching Iceland from abroad in the early sixties, Kristján Benediktsson expressed an opinion commonly voiced by unschooled poets:

> Í blöðin fregna- bunar- regnið niður,
> upp má grafa því úr þeim
> það sem skrafast nú um heim.
> .....
> Er nú fegin apturgenginn líka
> Norðanfari fróðlegur
> í frjetta svari ótregur;
> slíkir andar út um landið fjúka,
> eins og fífa í ofviðri,
> eða drífa í snjófoki.
>
> (Lbs. 2039, 8vo.)

The verse-letter had a function similar to that of a newspaper. It was the traditional way in which the Icelanders, particularly those without formal education, exchanged news both private and public. In 1872, Jónas Guðmundsson envisaged, in one such poem, that the growing

press would bring a major change in the form and content of the Icelanders' correspondence. The letter writer, he mused, no longer need discuss major national and foreign news:

> Frjettir í brjefi bauga fær ei raptur
> þó bísna mörg sje lífsins tilbreyting,
> dagblöðin færast fram og líka aptur
> í fimbulmóði lands um breiðan hring
> segja þaug allt er sögulega skeður
> og sjálfsagt er að trúa megum því
>
> (Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

Not every unschooled poet shared Jónas's enthusiasm for the new media. In 1850 Lýður Jónsson voiced the fear that the press - produced almost exclusively by students and educated men - was a grave danger to Icelandic literary traditions, in particular the quatrain and the rímur:

> Sje jeg fyrir forlög þaug
> ferskeitt ljóð og rýmur.
> Einn eða hálfan aldar baug
> undir troða grímur.
>
> (Lbs. 3885, 8vo.)

In another poem on the same subject Lýður shows that he was not only defending the traditions of the versemakers against foreign influences, but rather the national culture itself:

> Heil vertu blaðöld! með blaktandi vængjum,
> í blómguðum stað; á hvörju siturðu?
> Sögum og rýmum og sagnanna fjöld;
> hví villtu kjæfa það Feðranna fjör
> nær Föðurlands greppirnir kváðu?
>
> (Lbs. 3885, 8vo.)

Unlike the Danish-educated poets, Lýður confidently regarded the rímur as an important cultural legacy of the Golden Age. The poem moreover implies that the threat to

the national heritage comes not from the versemakers and an apathetic people but rather from the educated. Their aping of foreign ideas, manifested particularly in the press, is ill-fitted to the descendants of the ancient Icelanders:

> Ekki sómir Ísland forna endurapa,
> breta eða Sjálands siðir
> síður mundu koma að liði.
>
> (Lbs. 636, 8vo.)

Initially the nationalist movement was primarily concerned with fostering a national awareness and improving Iceland's position within the monarchy. To a large extent the success of these aims depended on the dissemination of the printed word, particularly the new periodicals which were central to nineteenth century nationalism. The problems involved in the distribution of books and newspapers were only partly a result of the fact that many of the major nationalistic periodicals were printed in Copenhagen. The pages of the twice-monthly newspaper Norðri, published in Akureyri, provide ample evidence of the difficulties involved in the distribution of a regular press even locally. From 1856 to 1861 the editor was Sveinn Skúlason (1824-88), who came to Akureyri in 1856 after seven years of study in Copenhagen. One of the first pieces he wrote for the paper was an open letter to a friend in Copenhagen where he discussed his new post with great optimism. The realities of collecting and disseminating news in Iceland, however, soon dampened this

spirited beginning. The winter of 1858-59 was unusually severe, especially in the North. In March Sveinn wrote a new instalment of his "Letters to Copenhagen" in a mood of total despondency. He described the threatening presence of the pack-ice with its inevitable consorts: arctic temperatures, shortages, misery and death. Distribution of the paper virtually ceased and for three months he had heard no news from the South of Iceland:

> blöðin liggja eins og strandrek hjá okkur blaðamönnunum og komast ekki þverfótar; og hingað norðureftir hefur ekkert frjetzt af suðurlandi síðan um jólaleytið, og engan þjóðólf hef ég fengið síðan í nóvembermánuði ... við bíðum því hér í hörkunum, og vonumst eftir vori, vorsól og verzlunarskipum. 7

The press was the Icelanders only regular information about the outside world apart from private correspondence from abroad.[8] Although the reporting of foreign news was seriously limited by the difficult communications that prevailed during the period, the number of periodicals and newspapers increased considerably between 1830 and 1874. Many of these publications had a short life, yet their existence demonstrates the great importance educated Icelanders attached to the printed word in propagating nationalism. The periodicals from this period also provide

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7 Norðri, 31st March, 1859.

8 A good example of letters intended to serve this purpose can be found in Brynjólfur Pétursson: Bréf, edited by Aðalgeir Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1964).

important evidence of the selfless work a number of people put into the national "awakening". In 1817 the Bókmenntafélag began to publish Íslensk sagnablöð, written primarily by Finnur Magnússon (1781-1847). The first issue covered what he regarded as the major news since 1804, when Minnisverð tíðindi had ceased. In 1827 the Sagnablöð changed into Skírnir which was devoted primarily to foreign political news and information about publications in Scandinavia. Skírnir was published and written in Copenhagen often by Icelandic students, and was probably less popular than the newspapers - e.g. Klausturpósturinn, Sunnanfari, Reykjavíkurpósturinn, Norðri and Þjóðólfur.

To some extent foreign news suffered from being published in Iceland rather than Copenhagen. The shortage and irregularity of news from abroad tended to make its presentation haphazard, badly organised and even misleading. The editors of Norðri had to depend on the usual conglomeration of sources including such foreign publications as they had access to, private correspondence as well as verbal accounts of returning Icelanders and crews of the trading and post-vessels. When a ship arrived at Akureyri, the editor would try to put his material hastily together, and more often than not the result was dense columns dealing with major events, anecdotes and petty crime. The press also published a great variety of translations, historical essays, poetry, fiction and so on. Moreover, articles on Icelandic problems often used foreign examples

to reinforce ideas of improvements and innovations. Icelanders' accounts of their travels abroad also tended to be based on contrasts and comparisons between these foreign lands and Iceland.

After the thirties, many contributions to newspapers and periodicals attempted to place Iceland in a context of other countries. Although the unschooled poets did not write extensively about foreigners, several poems convey interest in the world outside Iceland. In 1864, when he arrived in Copenhagen from Germany and Switzerland, Guðbrandur Vigfússon received a verse-letter from the farmer-poet Jón Þórðarson. The poem is a series of questions about the visit and reflects not only a curiosity about foreign peoples and customs, but also a rather haphazard knowledge. Jón's work as a whole suggests that he was well read in various subjects. He clearly knew about the effects of the Reformation in Germany and shows an interest in the religious situation in Munich where Guðbrandur was staying:

> Hverri trúnni þjóna þar
> þorri bæjarmanna?
>
> (Lbs. 755, 8vo.)

Inquiring about Guðbrandur's travels in Switzerland the poem reflects some familiarity with its unusual landscape. But his questions about Munich, for example, suggest that Jón may not have seen a map of Europe. He not only asks about the size and fabric of the city, but also wonders whether it looks over a countryside or the sea:

Kallast Múnken mikil borg,
má þar fagurt heita?
Eygist þaðan upsa torg,
eða héröð sveita?

(Lbs. 755, 8vo.)

The poem derives its quaint tone above all from Jón's eager curiosity about things he knew only from books or hearsay. Yet it is an intelligent and sensible inquiry about very alien countries:

Fékkstu skóga og fljótin sjéð
frá sem mætti skýra?
Kvað um hestakyn og féð
og kynning fleiri dýra?

(Lbs. 755, 8vo.)

There is some evidence to suggest that this kind of verse-letter was something of a joke among the educated Icelanders abroad. In a letter to Steingrímur Thorsteinsson in Copenhagen, Matthías Jochumsson parodied the versemaker's attempt to learn about foreign countries:

En úr sjálfu Englandi?
Er sú gamla tórandi?
.....
En úr römmu Rússlandi?
Ríkismanna niflheimi,
blóðugra dólga blóðtorgi,
böðla og þræla helmyrkri. 9

Perhaps because of his background, Matthías was able to parody the versemaker with good-humoured respect. Even his complaints about the lack of education in Iceland usually reflect an admiration for what he called "hráan kraft" - among his unschooled compatriots. His letter to Steingrímur is in part a comment on his friend's

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9 Bréf, p.75.

translation of Lear. Matthías carefully and politely expressed the reservation that the language of the translation was too literary. In this connection he puts forward the unusual view that Steingrímur may lack the stimulation from the speech of the people: "Ég vorkenni þér líka að vera alltaf svona langt frá vorum heimaöldu slordónum, sem hafa það til síns ágætis, að þeir tala betur 'Fatersproget' en vér prófessoramir."[10]

Unschooled poets wrote about foreign events and people in a style that varied from a straightforward reporting to the colourful narrative of the rímur. The rímur-poets sometimes expressed an opinion about an event in a foreign country, but usually they concentrated on producing a good story. In contrast the verse-letter often has a curious resemblance to Icelandic reporting at its worst. A poet would then relate his news in a breathless fashion making little distinction between local events of no interest to outsiders and major European wars. Thus in the eventful year 1864, Jónas Guðmundsson produced a stanza of seven lines which incorporated not only the shortage of coffee in the South of Iceland and the late arrival of the post vessel, but also the death of Frederik VII and the renewal of the Schlewig-Holstein War:

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10 Bréf, p.72.

Kaffeð er uppselt en Kóngur vor dáinn
komið í Danmörku beljandi stríð
fiskur í netin er sagður við sjóinn
samt er á nesjunum báginda tíð.
Í marz bæði og apríl hjer siðra með sönnu
sextán og þrjátíu dánir í sjó,
póstskipið ókomið, eru tvö önnur
akkerum bundin í Reykjavík þó.

(Lbs. 2854, 8vo.)

Occasionally a poet would express an opinion about the news which appeared in the press. An example of this can be found in a verse letter of 1831 from a clergyman to his sister:

því er miður höldum hjá,
hér i Norðurálfu,
upphlaupskviður þjáir þá,
þó er friður Danmörk á.

(Lbs. 2125, 4to.)

Many Icelanders were concerned when they heard about wars abroad, especially in Denmark.

The world outside Scandinavia had little relevance to the unschooled Icelander. The Danish-educated poets' cultural affinity with German literature and letters is reflected in the translations and poetry of clergymen, but figures only very rarely in the work of unschooled poets. Their interest in foreigners depended above all on what appeared in the press and on their limited first hand knowledge of travellers to Iceland. Thus several stanzas mention English traders who bought sheep from Icelandic farmers. Different countries are referred to here and there in passing but seldom form the main subject-matter of a poem. The most frequently mentioned non-Scandinavian

country was probably France, undoubtedly because its political situation was of general interest throughout the period. Several historical and political articles were also written about the French revolutions. The Revolution of 1830 is mentioned in verse-letters but usually without particular sympathy with the revolutionaries or the king. One poet expressed sympathy with the deposed king, partly it seems because he felt that it was rather brutal to throw an old man out of his country:

> Frönskum granda vísir vann,
> virða stjórnin harða,
> um Eyjabandið yfir hann
> eltu af landi sjötugan.
>
> (Lbs. 2125, 4to.)

By the mid-century, the periodicals often related their discussions of foreign events to Icelandic nationalism. The idea that France was the cradle of freedom appeared in numerous publications, most notably in the extensive account of 1848 in Norðurfari. Perhaps influenced also by a growing faith in national freedom at home, some unschooled poets began very tentatively to see themselves as a part of a larger movement towards freedom. In 1851 Brynjólfur Oddsson's humorous poem "Uppreist Íslendinga 1849-50" suggests half-seriously that the Icelanders may have been influenced by the European spirit of revolution, notably by the attitude to authority adopted by French revolutionaries:

> Forsprakkar gjörðust fystir þess
> (sem Frakkar uppreistanna um heim),
> Skagfirðingar, og féll úr sess
> fullkomlega sá stýrði þeim.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.93)

The press intermittently carried news from France and on the whole expressed sympathy with what was called the frístjórn. This is particularly true of Þjóðólfur, but Norðri also expressed a similar view. Its description of an official visit by Louis Napoleon to the South of France in 1852 suggests that the editor did not support his growing power: "og ef einhverjum varð að óska frístjórninni, sem þar á enn að heita til lukku, þá var hann þegar tekin höndum og varpað í fjötur."[11]

The name Napoleon was associated with greatness in several poems. Thus the bookbinder Þórarinn Sveinsson used the opportunity of Prince Jerome Napoleon's visit in 1856 to praise the name. He wrote a long poem to mark the occasion showing the throne of France as powerful and symbolic of freedom. It begins by expressing gratitude and surprise that a member of this important family should visit a small and insignificant country:

> Munu víst öfgar
> mörgum þykja,
> að hann frá hátrónu
> hæsta veldis
> gjöri sér ferð
> yfir gráan ægi
> vorn að líta vang
> vafinn snædyngjum.
>
> (Lbs. 393, 8vo.)

The poem continues to praise the history of France after the Revolution in 1789, when the people courageously destroyed their aristocratic oppressors:

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11 Norðri, 4th February, 1853.

Þoldu ei Frakkar
þeirra ríki,
og ráku frá stjórn
með römmum dauða,
og tóku af lífi;
aðalsmönnum eins
aðför veittu.

(Lbs. 393, 8vo.)

Þórarinn - who had been an apprentice in Copenhagen in 1798-1803 - had clearly read about the Revolution. He described the guillotine - "vélverkfæri ... er flýtti för þeirra að fróni heljar" - and the events of the period in some detail, ending with a praise of Napoleon; "hvers líka heimssagan / hefir fáa".

It is possible that Gísli Brynjúlfsson's introduction to Svava in 1860 influenced Sigurður Bjarnason's poem "Stjórnendur meginríkja Norðurálfu 1860". The poem accords well with Gísli's central theme of democracy and national freedom, and moreover seems too comprehensive and coherent to be based on many different sources. Again the word frístjórn appears, this time describing the parliamentary democracy fought for by English reformers or frelsishetjur:

Út úr netjum áþjánar
Enskir hvetja sporin,
formið setja frístjórnar
frelsishetjur margar þar.

(Ljóðmæli, p.106)

Like Gísli, Sigurður deplores the traitor to national freedom in France, Louis Napoleon:

Þjóðum reytir farsæld frá,
frelsi skeytir varla,

Jósef heitir hari sá
harðstjórn beitir hvar sem má.

(Ljóðmæli, p.107)

After the mid-century, when the first Icelanders went to America, poets in Iceland began to write about the New World. With the exception of the emigrants themselves, most poets wrote almost exclusively about the loss of people to another country, and about the sad departure of friends and relatives to a land that was distant and alien. Some of these poems are personal and convey no real knowledge or even interest in North America, apart from the general notion that it offered an easier and freer life than at home. Although many of these poems are very nationalistic, some poets grudgingly accepted that an escape from poverty and hardship was a valid reason for leaving the motherland. This was especially true during the early seventies when natural disasters and economic difficulties encouraged the first serious wave of emigration. At the same time those who wrote about this issue often asserted that to leave showed a lack of patriotism; it was defeatist and a crime against the motherland. On the whole these poems reflect the success of nationalism in Iceland in the sense that those who condemned the emigrants invariably appealed to a love of country, usually in an imagery derived from the þjóðskáld. One of the few exceptions is a verse-letter written in 1874 by Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson. Like most of his early work, the poem reflects a lack of

confidence in his countrymen:

> Vesturheims víðlendi sjer
> menn vilja að Paradís gjöra
> skyldi þeim skjátlast í því?
>
> (Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

Guðmundur expressed doubts as to whether America will come up to the emigrants' expectations. His criticism is not simply that people are leaving but rather that they ignore the example of the ancient forefathers, who sought friendship with their kinsmen in Scandinavia:

> Feðurnir sóktu sjer sæmd
> til sjóla í Danmörk og Görðum
> settust svo óðulum að
> niðjarnir neyta sjer -ei
> við náfrændur vinskap að binda
> Frðða í friðsælum lund.
>
> (Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

In Guðmundur's later poetry there is sometimes a suggestion that in old age he came to regard foreign countries as dangerous and even immoral. By this time he was fighting against acute depression and clearly felt isolated and forgotten. This was perhaps partly the result of disappointment regarding the lack of recognition given to his poetry, which had achieved some popularity before he left the theological college. In one of his later poems he has clearly forgotten his youthful dream of exciting foreign places:

> Mig fýsir eigi foldin Ísa.
> í fjarlæg ókunn sækja lönd
> þars trúarvíngl og róstur rísa
> og rjettarheld ei metast bönd
> gulls þar drottnar græðgi aum.
>
> (Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

Surprisingly few unschooled poets depicted foreign countries as fearsome and strange. There are, however, several examples of this, notably a poem by Jónas Jónsson, who envisaged foreign lands as one brawling den of vice, teeming with noisy and violent people:

Þar sem svall og sællífi
sálar brjálar friðnum
ásta brall og ósvífni
eymda kall og háreysti.

(Lbs. 756, 8vo.)

Unfortunately the period has left few descriptions of foreign countries written by unschooled people. One exception can be found in a letter written by the poet Friðrik Daníelsson (1830-63) who was apparently wrongly diagnosed as suffering from leprosy and went to Norway for medical help in 1861. He left Iceland on the 13th of August and arrived in Denmark near the end of September after a difficult journey. Perhaps the relief of seeing dry land contributed to Friðrik's obvious delight in the Danish landscape: "En það sem fallegast er, er að himinhár skógur mænir í loft upp skamt fyrir ofan húsa þyrpingarnar, hann var laufgrænn ... Helsingjaeyri er fallegur staður og stendur sunnan og vestan á lítilli eyri, líkt og hún skyldi standa innan á Oddeyri við Eyjafjörð, nema eyrin er miklu minni en Oddeyri. Húsin eru, að mér sýndist, af timbri, en afar skrautleg að lit og mér sýndust laufgrænar hríslur standa hingað og þangað um staðinn" (Lbs. 1836, 8vo.). The long letter, written originally as a diary, is thoughtful and observant. Friðrik clearly knew Danish and tried to converse with the crew in spite of being isolated

because of his disease.

On the whole poetry suggests that unschooled poets acquired a broader horizon during the period. Nevertheless countries outside Scandinavia remained alien and distant and apparently of marginal interest to most poets. In contrast nationalism undoubtedly stimulated enthusiasm for the Nordic ancestry of the Icelanders. This is reflected in several poems expressing pride in what Jón Mýrdal called - in "Frónið fríða" - "móðurmálið norðurlanda." The news of a Nordic Convention at Uppsala in 1877 encouraged Brynjólfur Oddsson to write about the Icelanders' role in preserving and nurturing the ancient Norse tongue:

> Málið forna, ætíð unga,
> engin hefta bönd;
> hljómaði fyrr sú hetjutunga
> helg um Norðurlönd;
> Íslendingum einum halda
> unnt var hennar rödd;
> um það verður eyjan kalda
> ein til vitnis kvödd.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.122)

One of the great values of Icelandic nationality, he suggests, is that "norrænn andi yfir / Íslands hvílir byggð".

Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's translation of Axel (1857) by the Swedish poet Esajas Tegnér was praised by several unschooled poets. The popularity of this poem perhaps stemmed partly from its story which was worthy of any rímur-poet. What the poets praised however, was the successful co-operation of two Nordic masters. Sigurður

Bjarnason wrote a set of six quatrains simply called "Axel" where he praised Tegnér for his imaginative work and ends by a compliment to Steingrímur for bringing this Swedish masterpiece to the Icelanders:

> Steingríms líka höndin hná
> hefur slíka snilldar skrá
> látið víkjast okkar á
> orðaríki vensku frá.
>
> (Ljóðmæli, p.80)

Brynjólfur Oddsson wrote one poem to praise Tegnér and another addressed to Steingrímur and the Icelandic language. He also emphasised the importance of Nordic unity by stressing the Icelanders' unique position among the Nordic nations. Poets such as Tegnér and the Danish Romantics are seen to be influenced by the echo of Iceland's Golden Age:

> Þjóðskáldið fræga á Svíaslóð
> ljek á hörpunnar sterka strengi
> og stillti söngva vel og lengi,
> er hljóma í eyrum hverri þjóð.
> Gengt hafa þeirra unaðssóni
> óðsmiðir Dana svanarómi,
> er sem þeir Íslands fjöllum frá
> framknýi bergmál raddarhá. 12

Brynjólfur, who himself translated several Danish poems, was clearly thinking of the Icelandic influence on the Scandinavian Romantics, notably Oehlenschläger and Tegnér, who used Icelandic literature extensively as a subject-matter in their work.

The unschooled poets often referred to the Icelanders as a Nordic nation, particularly in their Iceland-poems.

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12 Nokkur ljóðmæli, p.65.

Jón Hinriksson, for example, begins his 1874 poem by a solemn address to "þú norræna kyngöfga þjóð". There is no evidence that the unschooled poets who exalted the Nordic ancestry and the kinship with Scandinavia had any interest in Scandinavianism, if indeed any of them were aware of the movement.

Bjarni Thorarensen was the only Danish-educated poet in the period to express a really strong dislike of the Danes and the Danish landscape. The two unschooled poets who spent some time in Denmark, Sigurður Breiðfjörð and Jón Mýrdal, conformed to the more relaxed attitude of the later generation of Romantic poets - Breiðfjörð even translated B.S. Ingemann's very patriotic poem "Danevange med grønne Bred". For most unschooled poets, especially during the latter part of the period, nationalism not only encouraged a pride in the Nordic ancestry, but also gave a new meaning to the Icelanders' entrenched dislike of Danish officialdom. Rather than writing poetry simply blaming Danish merchants for dishonesty and offhand treatment of the poor, many poets developed antipathy towards Danish culture and people. In his novel Piltur og stúlka Jón Thoroddsen humorously describes the Danes in Iceland, notably the merchants in Reykjavík, in some ways as an occupying force.They endanger the cultural traditions and corrupt the morality of Icelandic women. There are many parallels in occasional stanzas, written by unschooled poets, but perhaps the most striking similarity

is to be found in Hjálmar Jónsson's "Danskurinn". Hjálmar's poetry has a totally different tone from that of Jón's novel. There is no humour and the language is harsh and scathing. Yet the Danish merchant in the poem is portrayed as a crude version of Jón's hr. Möller:

> Danskurinn margur drósum hjá
> dinglaði amors rófunum,
> virðing sína ei þekktu þá,
> þvældir í saurlífs flóunum;
>
> .....
>
> Íslenzkt fljóð með augun blá
> yrki dýrð með lóunum,
> að hún sloppin fanti frá
> flýtur uppi á hróunum.
>
> (Ritsafn, I, 491-92)

All Icelandic poets reserved their greatest criticism for the "Danish Icelanders", people who denied their nationality by in some way directly or symbolically taking sides with the Danes. Many of these poems are about people who prefer the Danish language to their native tongue. Thus Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson complained that the unschooled poet and the "folk scholar" used Danish words; the unschooled poets in turn complained about half-Danish officials. There are also a few poems critical of Icelandic women who, even when married to Icelandic men, adopt a male surname in the Danish fashion. Kristján Jónsson clearly saw this as an insult to the language and the motherland:

Íslenzku nafni einu að heita
ætla þær vera sæmdar rán
og sínu heiti af því breyta
ættjörð, þjóðerni og tungu að smán.

(Ljóðmæli, p.225)

Many poems criticising Icelanders for favouring Danish customs were written about a particular person, frequently an unnamed official:

Þekkirðu ekki þennan mann
með þykka skeggið svarta,
innan um skrokkinn íslenzkan
aldanskt flækist hjarta.

Ef þú talar orð við hann
ógn er hann líka sætur.
Gæfa Íslands hlægir hann
en hjartað á dönsku grætur.

(Ljóðmæli, p.64)

The poem, "Um Reykvíska höfðingja", shows that the people who wrote such poetry were not necessarily parochial or xenophobic. Its author was Magnús Grímsson, who consistently advocated progress in transport, education and science. He moreover wrote articles and fiction where he advised his countrymen to listen carefully to foreigners and take heed of constructive criticism.

A much more sophisticated example of the Icelanders' growing animosity towards the Danish government is to be found in the "Iceland-poem". At one end of the scale this was voiced in the crude terms of Símon Bjarnason's 1874 poem:

Eins og gömul ertu frilla
orðin kæra móðurlóð
aumleg Dana undirtylla,
er þitt drukku hjartablóð.

(Ljóðmæli, p.116)

Jónas Hallgrímsson, like most subsequent nationalists, contrasted freedom and subjection. His imagery was overtly related to the "awakening", which he regarded as a necessary precondition for independence:

> Veit þá enginn, að eyjan hvíta
> á sér enn vor, ef fólkið þorir
> guði að treysta, hlekki hrista,
> hlýða réttu, góðs að bíða?
>
> (Rit, I, 103)

The vocabulary of the Iceland-poem was metaphorical rather than explicit, but it is clear that the unschooled poets were in no doubt that its imagery of chains, slavery, darkness and so forth referred to Danish rule. The unschooled poets, although they imitated and plagiarised the þjóðskáld, tended to be less symbolic when describing the bondage of the Icelanders.

The period 1835-74 undoubtedly gave most Icelanders a new confidence in their country in relation to the outside world. This was partly a result of the Romantic nature poetry which exalted the Icelandic landscape and reverence for the medieval literature and history. Yet most poets regarded Iceland as a very poor and insignificant nation in relation to other European countries. In a number of poems they refer to what Jón Þorleifsson called "önnur lönd sem líður betur" or perhaps took a note of Danish-educated poets, namely Gísli Brynjúlfsson, who described the delights of foreign lands:

Þar aldin gullið undir hverju blaði
sér unir rótt í himinblíðu valdi,

(Ljóðmæli, p.220)

The early seventies were difficult years in Iceland when many people left, sometimes very reluctantly, to find a better life in North America. Yet most poets viewed the world with eyes that differed considerably from those of the previous generation. In one of several odes to the printing press written during the period, Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson highlights the confidence which the national symbols gave to his countrymen:

Þótt Ísland auðæfin bresti
og útlendra stórþjóða skraut
og frama þess fátæktin lesti
og fannhjúpur byrgi þess skaut,
á það samt fornsögu fræga
og frömuði menntanna næga.

(Lbs. 1775, 4to.)

Although many Icelanders may have been intimidated by the grand foreign visitors who came to observe them in 1874, the poets employed a confident vocabulary to demonstrate the nobility of their culture and the beauty of their land. Even those who complained about social injustice, poverty and the meagre soil on which they depended, voiced a love of country and a reverence for the Golden Age - then the most important ingredients of Icelandic nationality.

CONCLUSION

In Nationalism; The Evolution of an Idea, Eugene Kamenka argues that there is a fundamental difference between nationalism and patriotism. Like many writers on the subject, he claims that nationalism derived its impetus primarily from the French Revolution: the break-up of dynastic empires and absolute rule, radically altered the basis of political sovereignty and the "legitimacy sought and claimed" by governments. "But in establishing the institutions of popular sovereignty," he continues, "it is necessary to define what is the populace: self-government requires a community that is to be the self."[1] During the period from 1830 to 1874 Icelandic nationalists were not directly preoccupied with popular sovereignty. Nevertheless, the political struggle for independence inevitably raised various issues which contributed to a new definition of the political nation. In the thirties the proposed revival of the Alþing introduced the problem of how to determine the franchise. Although the Alþing was to be no more than a powerless

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1 Kamenka (London, 1976), p.14.

advisory assembly, the debate brought a realisation that the social and economic structure in Iceland was such that a franchise based on rent and property would discriminate against educated men - the most distinct élite in Icelandic society. There were numerous other features inherent in nationalism as an ideology which inevitably influenced attitudes to nationality. Foremost of these was perhaps the nationalists' emphasis on freedom.

Undoubtedly the most elevated ideal in the period, freedom, was depicted as an indigenous quality in Icelandic nature and the most admirable characteristic of the Golden Age. Freedom was not only discussed in the context of independence from Denmark, but was also regarded as an inevitable outcome of the national "awakening". Some Icelandic emigrants even claimed that they left the motherland to seek liberty. This was rarely stated as directly as in a poem by an Icelandic woman celebrating the 4th of July in her new homeland: "Til Ameríku auðarbríkur komu / þáðu frelsi og þá gleymdu / þrældóms helsi íslenzku" (Lbs. 2133, 4to.).

The change in ideas of nationality which occurred in the period 1830 to 1874 is illuminated by a comparison between the attitudes of the eighteenth-century reformers and the Romantic nationalists. They had in common a passionate endeavour to improve the social and economic conditions in their country, and an unwavering faith in

education as an instrument of progress. The former - notably Eggert Ólafsson, Hannes Finnsson and Magnús Stephensen - apparently dismissed theological concepts such as original sin, with its concomitant that man's nature was intrinsically base and corrupt. Nor did they elevate innocent man or the idea of a noble savage. Búnaðarbálkur, for instance, was partly an attempt to show that education can lead man towards a civilised existence. Its main purpose was to teach social and moral virtues to each according to his status: in the sæludalur those on the lowest rung of the social ladder will remain as children in need of guidance. Although he adhered to many of Eggert's educational and social tenets, Magnús Stephensen placed a greater emphasis on changing the character of the individual as a means of achieving social change. His ideas imply that education will drive the individual towards improving society as an act of self-preservation. Man's whole personality, he once argued, can be dramatically altered by education. The well educated person acquires a highly developed sensibility which is quite alien to the ignorant. Because of his sensitive mind, the educated individual can be physically destroyed by injustice and imperfection because he "ergjar sig til dauða yfir smávegis orði, er til vansa lúta má, eða vanþakkar og misvirðingar, sem óhefluð rustasál óhrærð brosir að."[2]

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2 Bréf, p.7.

It could be argued that Magnús underestimated the feelings behind a deferential and rustic exterior - which contrasts rather unfavourably to the notions of later reformers, notably Matthías Jochumsson. Yet his ideas about man reflect an important change in attitudes to the human potential, a change that was perhaps a necessary precondition for later ideas of nationality. From the eighteenth-century reformer's emphasis on nurture rather than nature, it was a short step towards the Romantic notion that the human soul was essentially beautiful. With the exception of Bjarni Thorarensen, the Danish-educated poets tended to agree with Tómas Sæmundsson that man instinctively sought perfection - "manninum er innrætt físn til fullkomnunnar"[3] - and that increased knowledge and general education would gradually make the nations mature and independent. Most Icelandic nationalists asserted that education gave man spiritual freedom, and they often depicted learning and a thirst for knowledge as the foundation of national and human liberty. The Romantic poets distinguished between learning and education, which was a search for truth. Not surprisingly this was an important sentiment in Matthías Jochumsson's inaugural issue as an editor of Þjóðólfur: "Kæru landsmenn! Þjóð vor er enn skammt á veg komin ekki einungis í verkunum, heldur í allri sannri menntan, sem er frelsisins andlegi

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3 Fjölnir, V, 1839, 73.

grundvöllur."[4]

The eighteenth-century reformers were not concerned with nationality in relation to popular sovereignty, but as a duty to society. Many of their ideas developed from their experience of Danish society, which differed fundamentally from their own. In the period, patriotism and national consciousness were regarded by educated Icelanders as interesting phenomena. The headmaster at Hólar, Hálfdán Einarsson (1732-85), inquired into the curious desire of Icelanders abroad to return to the motherland; and wrote an essay in Latin on the subject. Eggert Ólafsson's interest in patriotism may also have derived from the feeling of isolation and homesickness sometimes expressed by the growing number of Icelandic students in Copenhagen - his brother, Jón, apparently suffered severe depression during his stay in the capital. Eggert discussed patriotism on several occasions in poetry and prose, arguing that the Icelanders should respect the native language and customs; but often he tried to rationalise his passionate patriotism by expediency.

The Romantic nationalists were not interested in patriotism or even in national consciousness as phenomena. Their attention was focused primarily on understanding the nature of nationality and developing ways to express it.

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4 Þjóðólfur, 4th May, 1874, 110.

This inevitably raised questions about the political nation. Commenting on the proposed advisory assemblies in the early thirties, Bjarni Thorarensen referred to the opinions of Icelandic crown officials as "opinionem publicam".[5] Twelve years later an article in Fjölnir asserted that because they have become accustomed to absolute government, the Icelanders are no longer able to think about "alþjóðleg málefni."[6] In 1849 an editorial appeared in Þjóðólfur under the title, "Almenningsálit" - "public opinion".[7] It was an answer to an article in Reykjavíkurpósturinn claiming that the judgements of the alþýða were emotive and undisciplined and were therefore a worthless contribution to political debate, let alone policy decisions. There was clearly some common ground between the attitudes expressed in the two papers regarding the quality of public opinion. The main difference was that þjóðólfur put forward the view that the public should express their opinions on national issues, and that these must be taken into account in decision-making. Although þjóðólfur was the most radical voice in Icelandic politics at the time, it reflected the ingrained paternalism of the educated Icelander: ideas from below should be considered

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5 Bréf, p.196.

6 Fjölnir, VII, 113. The word alþjóð means the whole nation and in the nineteenth century the term alþjóðleg málefni usually referred to issues of concern to the alþjóð. Sometimes, however, the term was used in its modern meaning of international issues.

7 Þjóðólfur, 27th January, 1849, 25-6.

but they must be guided in such a way as to appear reasonable and informed. Yet, in comparison with eighteenth century notions about government and nationhood, the discussion of modern concepts such as almenningsálit and alþjóðleg málefni reflects a revolutionary change in the definition of the political nations and in ideas of nationality.

In 1845 an article in Ný félagsrit, called "Um þjóðerni", reflected on the nature of nationality. "Þjóðernið," the author asserts, "er heilagt, og réttindi þess eru órjúfanleg."[8] He goes on to show that the true nature of nationality can be found in the New Testament, which demonstrates not only that all men were initially equal, but also that originally no nation stood above another. Oppression and slavery, the article points out, are contrary to Christ's view of man and nationhood. Icelandic nationalists often argued that nationality was the most important division between human beings. They implicitly stressed that unity and common aspirations should naturally prevail within a nation and that every member born into the group had within him a spark of the national spirit or character. By the mid-century educated poets confidently depicted the relationship between the Icelander and his native land as an involuntary bond.

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8 Ný félagsrit, V, 1845, 16.

Gísli Brynjúlfsson, who was totally absorbed by the question of nationality at the time, asserted in 1849 that "þjóðernið er mönnunum ósjálfrátt og meðfætt, en ekki, eins og sumir segja, uppgerð og framkomið af uppspunnum lærdómi."[9] The central message, and the eventual success, of Romantic nationalism in Iceland depended to a large extent on its portrayal of nationality as a natural human emotion, rather than as a citizenship or loyalty to kith and kin.

The Romantic nationalists, including the _þjóðskáld_, saw their role as leaders whose primary aim was to guide their compatriots towards a future which demanded new ways of expressing and preserving Icelandic nationality. The poets were confident that when the Icelanders had generally recognised the superiority of their medieval forefathers and had understood the beauty and power of the native language and the landscape, they could once more be proud of their country. There were different emphases according to political views, personal preferences and social status; and many nationalists disagreed considerably about the kind of society they envisaged in the future. What most educated nationalists had in common, however, was an idealism and acute awareness of change. This was reflected above all in the "Iceland-poem", which differed profoundly from earlier poetry about the motherland.

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9 _Norðurfari_, II, 1849, 38.

Jón Þorlákssón described Iceland in a way which contradicted the nationalists' concept of an "awakening":

> Fátæk em eg
> og ei fjölskrúðug,
> öldruð móðir
> ótal barna,
> em eg köldum klædd
> klaka-stakki,
> af því ber eg nafn
> alla daga. 10

Jón's vision of Iceland may appear similar to Hjálmar Jónsson's millennial poem, but it lacks completely the urgency which characterises the nineteenth-century contributions to the genre. One of the central aims of national "awakening" was to obliterate the Icelanders' passive acceptance that their country was poor, backward and barely habitable. Even when they severely criticised apathy and pessimism, the Romantic poets usually conveyed vitality and optimism in relation to the future.

By the mid-century, the nationalistic message of the þjóðskáld began to appear in the work of the unschooled poets. Nationalism was often expressed directly in themes from history and in "Iceland-poems", but sometimes it emerged in verse-letters, obituaries and the like. The Golden Age, although it was not a new subject in versemaking, acquired a fresh meaning. It became a mirror reflecting the nation's potential or a measure used to judge the present. Many poets associated nationality with the process of growing up, or with childhood memories related to a

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10 Ljóðmæli, II, 356.

particular landscape. It is significant that one of the most popular terms for the native land in this period was fósturjörð or fósturland - conveying the idea of nursing and rearing - which perfectly expresses the essence of the Romantics' ideas of nationality. In "Morgunvísa við Gilsfjörð" (1860), Jón Þórðarson expressed delight in a beautiful spring morning, but he also established a connection between his childhood and his nationality:

> Blítt er vor við Breiðafjörðinn
> Brosir við mér fósturjörðin;
> Endurmyndast æskuvor.
>
> (Lbs. 755, 8vo.)

A typical contemporary demonstration of a love of country, the poem reflects private emotions and a sense of belonging. The idea of nationality conveyed in this kind of poetry is very readily associated with Romantic notions of nature, which contradicted the eighteenth-century emphasis on an easily defined and rational purpose in human activity.

The major "Iceland-poems" written by the Danish-educated poets and those who emulated them, give an important insight into the ideas of nationality which developed during the period. Yet they reflect only one aspect of changing attitudes. In isolation these poems give an idealised picture of how paternalistic notions of social hierarchy gradually gave way to an idea of a people united by a bond of their common culture and a love of country. That this was an important aspect of changing attitudes can hardly be doubted. The message of

the Danish-educated poets concentrated very emphatically on eradicating factiousness and disunity by establishing symbols of nationality that could appeal to every Icelander. Indeed these symbols endured in the culture as can be seen in the poems composed in 1944.[11] In a small population the notion of cultural unity was neither alien nor difficult to reinforce, especially as nationalism developed in a period of relative economic stagnation. Yet social divisions and tensions prevailed unabated - even the opposition paper Þjóðólfur automatically employed a vocabulary of social hierarchy demonstrating the paternalism of the movement. Poetry affords a limited evidence as to how, in the period from the eighteen-thirties to the seventies, Icelandic society was welded together by new ideas of nationality which differed profoundly from the blurred and half-formed notions that were debated by the men of the Enlightenment.

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11 One of the many examples of this continuity is Hulda´s well known "Hver á sér fegra föðurland, / með fjöll og dal og bláan sand, / með norðurljósa bjarmaband / og björk og lind í hlíð?

APPENDIX I

The appendix includes very brief biographies of the nineteenth-century poets referred to in the thesis. Many of the details are taken from Íslenzkt skáldatal, Íslenzkar Æviskrár and Rímnatal.

Andrésson, Einar. 1814-91

A farmer's son, Einar had one year of formal schooling with Jón Espólín sýslumaður. He was a farmhand and a fisherman until 1851, when he began farming at Bóla in Blönduhlíð. He lived at Bóla until 1864, and subsequently he farmed in different places in the North of Iceland. Einar's work includes rímur, patriotic verses, poems about nature and occasional stanzas. He was a well known poet during the latter part of his life but expressed great humility as a poet - "Hagyrðinga eg hópnum í / hrökklast í sess á neðra bekki". Einar's work reflects considerable influence from such as Jónas Hallgrímsson.

Árnason, Helgi (fróði). 1822-88

A farmer's son from Dalasýsla, Helgi became a farmhand at an early age. He was soon drawn to the

freedom of the "traveller" and for most of his life he walked from place to place. Sometimes he worked for a short period on a farm, often entertaining by reading or story-telling. In the summer he usually peddled books for publishers in Reykjavík or Akureyri. He collected his poetry systematically in manuscript, but was said to be rather secretive about his work. He nevertheless had several poems - primarily obituaries - printed in the press. His poetry is often extremely turgid and generally ponderous. He was very religious but unorthodox and often severely critical of contemporary society.

Benediktsson, Kristján (frá Hvassafelli)

Kristján is not mentioned in Íslenskar æviskrár or in Rímnatal. The manuscript of his poems, Lbs. 2039, 8vo., is in his own hand and was written ca. 1875. Some of the poems clearly refer to events in the sixties.

Bjarnason, Símon (Dalaskáld). 1844-1916

A farmer's son who became a shepherd in Skagafjarðardalir - which accounts for his nickname - Símon later travelled around selling books, especially his own. He was a prolific poet who wrote stanzas and rímur on demand. Although he was primarily an entertainer, Símon wrote several poems about poetry, history and significant national events. His most successful poems are about nature and everyday events, often reflecting an influence of Sigurður Breiðfjörð. His first rímur were

published in 1871 and a year later a collection of his poems appeared in print.

Bjarnason, Jón. 1823-1905

After graduating from the theological college in 1851, Jón was a teacher at Eyrarbakki. He was ordained in 1854 and served in several parishes until 1869, when he had to leave the ministry because he had fathered two or more children out of wedlock - two years later he was reinstated. After 1900 several of Jón´s articles were published in the press but most of his poetry has remained in manuscript. His work, notably the poem "Hekla", reflects an influence from Jónas Hallgrímsson. Apart from nature, Jón wrote about characters from the Sagas. His nationalistic poems date primarily from after 1874.

Bjarnason, Sigurður. 1841-65

A farmer´s son from Vatnsnes in Húnavatnssýsla, Sigurður began to write poetry as a mere child. Although he was only twenty-four years old when he drowned in an accident, he wrote no less than five rímur and numerous poems. Most of his work is in traditional metres, but his subject-matter was often similar to that of the Romantic poets. He wrote many poems about his feelings and hopes, often expressing self-doubt and melancholy.

Breiðfjörð, Sigurður Eiríksson. 1798-1846

Breiðfjörð was born into a poor but - on his mother´s side - a well connected farming family in Rifgirðingar, an

island in Breiðifjörður. In 1814 or 1815, he was sent to Copenhagen to learn the trade of a cooper, but very little is known about the four years he stayed in Denmark. After his return to Iceland, Breiðfjörð worked in different places until 1830, when friends and relatives supported his wish to study law in Copenhagen. His money lasted only a few months, and in 1831 he went to Greenland as a cooper and whaling instructor for the Royal Greenland Company. He returned to Iceland and lived in declining economic circumstances - partly due to his intemperance. Breiðfjörð was undoubtedly the most influential unschooled poet of the century.

Brynjúlfsson, Gísli. 1827-88

A son of a clergyman who died in an accident before his birth, Gísli went to the grammar school at Bessastaðir. He graduated in 1845 and left the same year for Copenhagen to study law. Gísli never completed his studies, but he received a grant from Árnasjóður between 1848 and 1877. He was a member of the Alþing for Skagafjarðarsýsla from 1859 to 1863 and a co-editor of Ný félagsrit from 1848 to 1858. His most important contribution to publishing was the periodical Norðurfari (1848-9), which he edited with Jón Thoroddsen but wrote almost exclusively himself. In 1874 he was appointed a lecturer in Icelandic Studies in Copenhagen University. Gísli edited and translated Icelandic literature and wrote several articles. The poems he published in Norðurfari, Svava and Ný félagsrit

were immediately popular, but his first book of poetry was not published until 1891.

Daníelsson, Friðrik. 1830-63

Friðrik's parents were servants at Hólar in Eyjafjörður who managed eventually to acquire a farm of their own. Friðrik learned the trade of a carpenter at Akureyri, but in 1856 he moved to his parents' farm, Skáldastaðir. Diagnosed as suffering from leprosy, he went to Denmark for treatment, but died in a hospital in Norway. The account of his journey to Denmark and his stay in a Copenhagen hospital is in Lbs. 1836, 8vo. Friðrik wrote patriotic poetry which was strongly influenced by the Danish-educated þjóðskáld.

Espólín, Jón Jónsson. 1769-1836

A son of a sýslumaður, Jón went to Copenhagen to study law in 1788. He graduated in 1792 and returned to Iceland to take up a post as a sýslumaður in Snæfellssýsla. In 1808 he became a sýslumaður in Skagafjarðarsýsla, where he lived most of his life. He is best known for his historical writing, especially Árbækur Íslands (Copenhagen, 1821-55). Yet he was also a prolific poet and translator who wrote several rímur, hymns and a novel. Most of his poetry is rather turgid and ponderous with stylistic resemblance to the work of Eggert Ólafsson.

Gizurarson, Þorsteinn. 1768-1844

A farmer's son who became a farmer and hreppstjóri,

Þorsteinn was a well-known carpenter in his native district in the North-East of Iceland. He was a rímur-poet who also wrote about political and religious subjects. Most of his poetry, however, is concerned with his own circumstances as a farmer and a poet.

Grímsson, Magnús. 1825-1906

A farmer's son from Reykholtsdalur, Magnús went to the grammar school and later to the theological college. He graduated in 1850 after paying his way by working as a stoker and caretaker for the college. Subsequently he stayed in Reykjavík for five years, mostly teaching and writing. He was ordained in 1855 and served in Mosfellssveit until his death. Magnús was a polymath but is best known for his collaboration with Jón Árnason in publishing the first collection of Icelandic folk-tales a and myths, Íslenzk ævintýri (1852). His interests included natural science, education, communication and Icelandic studies. He was the editor of Ný tíðindi (1851-52); published a reading primer for children (1854); translated various works on education and wrote numerous articles. Although his prose work reflects a strong interest in the "national awakening" most of his writing is light-hearted. His first book of poems was published in 1855.

Gröndal, Benedikt. 1827-1907

The son of Sveinbjörn Egilsson, the classical scholar and a teacher at Bessastaðir, Gröndal left for Copenhagen

to study natural science in 1846, but returned to Iceland in 1850 without graduating. After seven years of teaching and writing he returned to Denmark and became involved with a Catholic missionary which led to a study in Germany and Belgium in 1858-59. He then returned to Copenhagen where he stayed until 1874. Gröndal was the first Icelander to complete a higher degree in Nordic philology (1863) but continued to teach natural science after 1874. Gröndal's writing is extensive and diverse and includes natural science - which he promoted in Iceland - philology and translations from different languages. He became a popular poet during the late forties after his first poems appeared in the last issue of Fjölnir (1847). Gröndal tried various genres including prose satire, drama and even rímur. His best known works are probably the humorous Sagan af Heljarslóðarorustu (1861) and his autobiography Dægradvöl. His poetry made great impact on several Icelandic poets before 1874.

Guðmundsson, Friðrik. 1837-99

A farmer's son from Rangárvellir, Friðrik became an apprentice to the bookbinder Egill Jónsson in Reykjavík. After working in Reykjavík for most of his life, he moved to Eyrarbakki to live with his brother Guðmundur who was a bookseller. Like many bookbinders of the period, Friðrik had varied interests, including painting, but he did not systematically write down his poetry. Many of his poems attack the life in Reykjavík, officialdom in particular.

Guðmundsson, Jónas. 1832-98

A farmer's son from Borgarfjörður, Jónas went to Reykjavík to train as a blacksmith. Subsequently he was a farmhand for many years, but eventually acquired his own farm at Ölvaldstaðir in Borgafjarðarsýsla. Jónas wrote numerous poems on a variety of subjects and of differing quality. He was clearly aware of the "new" style of writing and often emulated the Danish-educated þjóðskáld. He wrote patriotic poetry about the Golden Age and Icelandic nature as well as verse-letters and occasional stanzas.

Hákonarson, Jón. 1770-1836

Jón was a farmer at Narfeyri but for the last years of his life lived at Helgafell. He was a well known poet in the West of Iceland and had stanzas published in Klausturspósturinn. He wrote rímur, an aldarháttur and formannavísur. Jón was strongly influenced by Eggert Ólafsson.

Hallgrímsson, Jónas. 1807-45

A son of a clergyman, Jónas lost his father at the age of seven. He was brought up in Eyjafjörður and educated with the help of relatives. He graduated from the grammar school in 1829 and left for Copenhagen to study law in 1832. He changed his course of study to natural science and was supported by the government to write a description of Iceland. He thus travelled widely around the country in 1837 and between 1839 and 1842; many of the places he

visited form the central theme of poems such as "Víti" and "Fjallið Skjaldbreiður". Jónas was one of the founders of the periodical Fjölnir and after his death the final issue of the periodical was dedicated to his work. Although Jónas's poetry is not large in quantity, he was undoubtedly the most influential Icelandic poet of the century - traces of his influence can be found in the work of the great majority of poets writing between 1850 and 1874.

Hinriksson, Jón. 1829-1921

For most of his adult life, Jón was a farmer in Mývatnssveit. Always very interested in co-operation and progress, he joined the Bókmenntafélag as a young man and later took part in local affairs. Politically he was a staunch supporter of Jón Sigurðsson and his poetry suggests that he was invariably on the side of commonsense and moderation. His poetry reflects an awareness of the Romantic style of writing, yet he usually emulated other poets with great care.

Jónsson, Níels. 1782-1857

Níels was brought up in Skagafjörður and began his adult life as a farmhand and fisherman. He married when he was just over thirty and farmed for a short period until he divorced his wife. Later he took up midwifery and healing which gave him a relatively comfortable living. Níels was completely self-taught but an educated man and a prolific writer. He wrote a great number of poems and

essays which he collected systematically in the hope of posthumous recognition. Most of his work is didactic, religious and philosophical, and sometimes reflects a strong influence from the work of Eggert Ólafsson. Very few of his poems have been published.

Hjálmarsson, Björn. 1769-1853

A son of a clergyman, Björn graduated from grammar school in 1789. He was barred from the ministry for a few years because he fathered a child out of wedlock, and worked as a book keeper in Reykjavík until he was ordained in 1794. For the remainder of his life he was an eminent pastor in Strandasýsla.

Jochumsson, Matthías. 1835-1920

A son of a farmer in Breiðfjörður, Matthías began to earn his living at an early age. Before he entered the grammar school in Reykjavík, Matthías had worked as a farmhand, fisherman and a shop assistant. He was supported by benefactors to study commerce in Copenhagen from 1856 to 1857. This year in fact changed his course and in 1856 he graduated from the theological college in Reykjavík. He was ordained in 1866 and served for six years in Kjalarnes. During this period he suffered poverty and the loss of his first and second wife. In 1871 he left Iceland in a depressed mood hoping that new sights and people would lift his spirits. Matthías travelled in Norway and Denmark and spent a year in England returning home in 1874 full of

energy and optimism. From 1874 to 1880 he was the editor of Þjóðólfur but returned to the ministry in 1880, first at Oddi and then in Akureyri. Although he was a controversial figure within the Church because of his free-thinking, Matthías became a popular poet and writer of hymns. Undoubtedly the most prolific poet of his day, Matthías also translated from various languages.

Jónsdóttir, Júlíana. 1837-1918

The illegitimate child of a farmhand and a servant, Júlíana was brought up in Borgarfjörður until the age of thirteen, when she went to Breiðfjörður. Here she worked as a servant until 1874 when she moved to Stykkishólmur and the marginally greater independence of village life. Júlíana was the first Icelandic woman to have a book of poetry published (Stúlka, 1876). She also wrote a play which was performed in Stykkishólmur. Júlíana emigrated to America in 1880 after trying for almost a decade to escape from farm work and poverty. Her early poems reflect bitter disappointments and frustrated ambitions. In America she sometimes wrote about Iceland in the characteristic mood of longing and homesickness which marks many poems written by Icelanders abroad.

Jónsson, Einar. 1802-60

For most of his adult life Einar was a farmhand in Skagafjörður and Jökuldal. He began farming independently in 1844 and wrote several poems about his life at Hjalli,

a small and isolated farm in the East of Iceland. Einar's poetry is often in a light mood, but sometimes with serious and critical undertones. He was well known as a poet in his locality, but does not appear to have had his poetry published in periodicals.

Jónsson, Hallgrímur. 1811-80

A son of a clergyman, Hallgrímur graduated from Bessastaðaskóli in 1835 and subsequently went to Copenhagen to study theology. He returned in 1840 and became a pastor at Hólmar in Reyðifjörður, where he served until his death.

Jónsson, Hjálmar. 1796-1875

Usually called Bólu-Hjálmar, the poet was the illegitimate son of a servant girl and was brought up on the parish at different farms in Eyjarfjörður. From 1822 and until 1871 Hjálmar was a crofter. Without any formal education he taught himself various skills such as writing and wood-carving. His poetry, which is substantial, reflects extensive knowledge about Icelandic literature and history and an awareness of contemporary events. He wrote many rímur and tales but, in spite of the fact that he was a well known poet, only a few of his poems were published during his lifetime. His first book of poems was published in 1879.

Jónsson, Jón (lærði). 1759-1846

A son of a clergyman, Jón was privately educated by

Hálfdán Einarsson at Hólar. He was ordained in 1783 and lived most of his life at Möðrufell. Jón was strongly influenced by the Enlightenment and wrote and translated works on religion, agriculture, economics and natural science. He wrote numerous poems - including hymns, which are characteristically learned.

Jónsson, Jónas (Sigluvíkur-Jónas). 1828-1907

A son of a clergyman, Jónas was well educated although he did not go to the grammar school. He worked for a living primarily by teaching children - he also taught swimming. He lived for most of his life in Eyjarfjörður but emigrated to America in 1880 returning home after nine years. Jónas wrote a great deal of poetry which he copied out very neatly in a book complete with introduction and a list of contents. His work conveys a variety of moods, ranging from humorous stanzas to religious poems and patriotic poetry, reflecting a strong Romantic influence. Jónas was also a well known "folk scholar". He had poems printed in Norðri, notably "Haustvísur" which adopted the metre of Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Þú stóðst á Heklu tindi hám".

Jónsson, Kristján (Fjallaskáld). 1842-68

A son of a farmer in Þingeyjarsýsla, Kristján lost his father at the age of twelve. When he was fourteen he left home to earn a living as a farmhand. At nineteen he acquired sudden fame, especially for the poem "Dettifoss"

which appeared in Íslendingur in 1861. Several people supported him to prepare for the grammar school in Reykjavík. His studies ended abruptly in 1868, when he left the school without graduating. When he died Kristján was a teacher with a merchant family in the East of Iceland. He was a popular poet who was strongly influenced by Benedikt Gröndal.

Jónsson, Lýður. 1800-76

The son of Jón Hákonarson (see above). Lýður remained a servant all his life, but became a well known poet particularly in the South-West of Iceland. He wrote a great deal of poetry, including rímur about contemporary events and people. Lýður wrote mainly in traditional metres but covered diverse subjects. He was especially concerned with social conditions, poverty, and the decline in the status of the traditional poets.

Jónsson, Pálmi. 1818-?

Little is known about this poet who emigrated to America. He was a farmhand or a farmer at Hvalsnes in Laxárdal before he emigrated in 1876. One of his poems deals with his harsh and deprived childhood and a frustrated desire to learn and read books. Poverty and social divisions are common themes in his work which includes verse-letters and nature poetry.

Lynge, Sigurður. 1818-81

Sigurður was an itinerant teacher and farmhand and later a farmer at Háteigur in Akranes. His poetry covers a variety of subjects including history and contemporary events. He even wrote a poem which was apparently recited at the National Convention at Þingvellir in 1851. His work reflects patriotism, a strong religious faith, and some stylistic influence from Eggert Ólafsson.

Mýrdal, Jón. 1825-99

A farmer's son from Mýrdal in Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla, Jón studied privately with a clergyman for one winter. Lack of finances prevented further academic study and in 1852 he completed his training as a carpenter in Reykjavík. After a broken marriage in 1854, Jón went to Copenhagen. Little is known about his two years abroad, but when he returned to Iceland he worked at his trade in the North of Iceland until he moved to Akranes in 1890. The bulk of Jón's work is prose, notably his novel Mannamunur (1872). Several unschooled poets praised this work in verse but, like his poetry, it was harshly criticised by some of his educated contemporaries. Jón's first book of poems was published in 1873.

Níelsson, Daði (fróði). 1809-57

One of the best known "folk scholars" of his time, Daði lost his father in infancy and was brought up by relatives. He described his childhood and youth as harsh

and deprived. Entirely self-taught, he worked for most of his life as a farmhand. After 1850, however, he became a nightwatchman in Akureyri and two years later began travelling around selling books. It was on such a journey that he perished somewhere near Blönduós. Daði wrote numerous rímur - perhaps as many as twenty-five - and left a book of poems in manuscript which has the quaint but characteristic title, Nýtilegt ljóðmælasafn. Many of his poems are very religious and contemplative.

Oddsson, Brynjólfur. 1824-87

A farmer's son from Borgarfjörður, Brynjólfur learned bookbinding in Reykjavík in 1848-53. He worked at this trade all his life, first in Reykjavík and subsequently in Ísafjörður. He returned to Reykjavík in 1868 and eventually became a moderately prosperous man. Brynjólfur wrote about a variety of subjects, including political events and history, but he clearly preferred a lyrical style. He became a well known poet and was encouraged to publish his collected poems in 1869. Many of Brynjólfur's poems successfully adopted the stylistic features most popular at the time.

Ólafsson, Páll. 1827-1905

The son of Ólafur Indriðason, who was a great supporter of Fjölnir, Páll did not go to the grammar school. From 1848 until 1856, when he married a prosperous widow, Páll was a farmhand. During his first marriage he

was a relatively well-off farmer who could spend some time on his great passion, horses. When his wife died in 1880, Páll remarried a young woman, Ragnhildur, probably the only Icelandic woman who became the central subject of her husband's poetry. The obvious joy Páll found in his later life was accompanied by persistent poverty in spite of the fact that he was one of the best known unschooled poets of his generation. He wrote countless quatrains on a variety of occasions, verse-letters and patriotic poetry. Many of his stanzas are still well known and his "Ó blessuð vertu sumarsól" is among the most popular lyrics from the period.

Sigurðsson, Guðmundur Gísli. 1834-92

A son of a clergyman in Steingrímsfjörður, Guðmundur studied in Reykjavíkurskóli and graduated from the theological college in 1862. He assisted his father for a time after he was ordained, but became a pastor in Gufudalur in 1866. He had to retire from the ministry in 1871 because of mental instability. Recognised as a poet when he was at school, Gísli wrote for a variety of official functions. Several of his poems were printed in newspapers and hymn-books. He wrote a great deal and collected his work methodically, including an extraordinary number of obituary poems. His nature poetry and nationalistic verses reflect a strong Romantic influence.

Sigurðsson, Runólfur. 1798-1862

A son of a clergyman, Runólfur apparently received very little formal education. He became a moderately prosperous farmer who lived all his life at Mýrdal in Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla. Although he wrote on a variety of subjects, Runólfur was particularly concerned with events in his locality. His poetry reflects no stylistic influence from the Romantic poets.

Sívertsen, Ögmundur Sigurðsson. 1799-1845

A son of a clergyman, Ögmundur was a student in Bessastaðaskóli between 1816 and 1824. He studied law and later natural science in Copenhagen but never graduated. Between 1834 and 1837 he lived in Keflavík, teaching and working in retailing. He was ordained in 1837 and served mainly in Vatnsnes. Some of his work was published including a book of poems, Ögmundargeta (Copenhagen, 1832). His poems were widely copied and appeared in several periodicals. "Leirskáld mikið" was how Benedikt Gröndal described Ögmundur's poetic ability in Dægradvöl.

Sveinsson, Bjarni. 1813-83

A farmer's son from the East of Iceland who graduated from Bessastaðaskóli in 1841. Before he was ordained in 1847, Bjarni earned a living mainly by teaching. Subsequently he served in different parishes. Many of Bjarni's poems were severely critical of Icelandic politics, both crown officials and the nationalists. He also

criticised the "new" poetry. In 1874, Bjarni wrote a poem parodying the Icelander's self-interested deference to the king during his visit to celebrate the millennium.

Sveinsson, Þórarinn. 1778-1859

A bookbinder who began the trade as an apprentice at Leirárgarðar with Magnús Stephensen, who later became his benefactor. Þórarinn then continued his training in Copenhagen between 1798 and 1802. After he returned to Iceland he farmed and worked at his trade in various places in the South-West of Iceland, including Bessastaðir. The last decades of his life appear to have been characterised by gradually declining fortunes. According to Benedikt Gröndal (Dægradvöl, pp.43-44), Þórarinn was a well known character.

Thomsen, Grímur. 1820-96

The only son of the steward at Bessastaðaskóli, Grímur was prepared for university privately. He left for Copenhagen in 1837 and in 1845 became the first Icelander to graduate in contemporary European literature; his dissertation on Byron earned Grímur a doctorate in 1845. In 1848 he became an official in the Danish foreign office, first in Belgium and England and later in Denmark. He returned to Iceland in 1867 and settled at Bessastaðir. He was a member of the Alþing between 1869 and 1891. Although most of his poetry was written after the 1860s, Grímur was well known as a poet by the forties.

especially among educated men - his first poem appeared in Fjölnir in 1844. Grímur was perhaps the most cosmopolitan Icelander during the first half of the century and made a great impression on his younger contemporaries. Later his political conservativism alienated some of his former admirers, including Gísli Brynjúlfsson and Benedikt Gröndal.

Thorarensen, Bjarni 1786-1841

The son of the sýslumaður at Hlíðarendi, Bjarni was prepared privately for university. In 1802 he went to Copenhagen to study law and graduated in 1807. For four years he remained a minor government official in Copenhagen as well as receiving a grant from Árnasjóður. He returned to Iceland in 1811 to take up a post as a judge in the High Court, and in 1833 he was appointed an amtmaður in the North of Iceland. Bjarni sat on the committee which debated the restoration of the Alþing in 1839 and 1841, where he fought against placing the Alþing in Reykjavík. Although his first book of poetry was not published until after his death, Bjarni was a well known poet well before the thirties.

Thoroddsen, Jón. 1818-68

A son of a farmer at Reykhólar in Barðastrandarsýsla, Jón finished the grammar school at Bessastaðir in 1840 and left for Copenhagen the next year to study law. He did

not complete his studies but joined the army to fight in the first Schleswig-Holstein War in 1848, before returning to Iceland without a degree. Three years later he returned to Copenhagen to complete his studies. He became a sýslumaður, first in his home sýsla but later he was appointed to Borgafjarðarsýsla. Jón is probably best known for his novels, but he was an accomplished poet who wrote several popular lyrics.

Thorsteinsson, Steingrímur. 1831-1913

The son of Bjarni Thorsteinsson amtmaður, Steingrímur was brought up at Arnarstapi. He graduated from the grammar school in Reykjavík in 1851 and went to Copenhagen in the same year. Although he registered as a student of law, he eventually graduated in history, Greek, Latin and Nordic philology in 1863. Steingrímur married a Danish wife and settled in Copenhagen until 1872, mostly teaching and writing. He then left for Iceland to take up an appointment as a teacher in the grammar school in Reykjavík. Steingrímur's first poem appeared in print in 1849 and subsequently his work appeared regularly in Ný félagsrit. He also contributed numerous poems to Svava (1860). Steingrímur also translated a great number and variety of foreign literature, both popular and classic.

Tómasson, Jóhann. 1793-1865

An illegitimate child who was prepared for grammar school by his clergyman father. After graduating from

Bessastaðaskóli in 1816, Jóhann worked as a teacher, fisherman and secretary until he was ordained in 1820. In 1830 he became a minister at Hestur in Borgarfjörður where he served until his death. He was said to be useless as a farmer and remained poor all his life. Only a few of his poems, mostly obituaries, have been printed. Jóhann wrote a great variety of poetry, some of which reflects an influence of Búnaðarbálkur, but also a strongly stylistic resemblance to some of Bjarni Thorarensen's poems. He wrote several poems about the frustration of farming and poverty. Jóhann began to write down his poetry in school, a habit he continued throughout his life. His book of poems is in JS.600, 4to.

Torfason, Guðmundur. 1798-1879

A son of a clergyman, Guðmundur was a student in Bessastaðaskóli between 1814 and 1820. He was ordained four years later and served in various parishes. He is perhaps best known for his Reykjavíkurbragur, which gave an account of a fight with the police in Reykjavík which ended with a night in prison. Guðmundur was well known as something of a strong man and a drinker as well as a poet. His work includes satire, rímur translations and occasionally poetry, mostly unpublished.

Þórarinsdóttir, Helga. 1797-1874

An illegitimate child, Helga was brought up with her mother. She married a farmer and lived in Vatnsdal. Apart

from her poetry, her life is for the most part unrecorded. She wrote a number of poems which reflect a strong religious faith and a great deal of suffering because of death and illness.

Þórðarson, Jón. 1819-68

A farmer's son, Jón became a farmer, first in Gilsfjörður and finally at Einfætingsgil in Bitra. He wrote a great variety of poetry dealing with religion, nature, nationalism, local events and so on. He wrote primarily in the style of the þjóðskáld and also clearly admired Sigurður Breiðfjörð. Some of his poems appeared in the press, notably "Fjallmeyjan" and "Gullfoss". Some of his best poems are about his native Breiðifjörður, a subject that moved many local poets to verse during this period. Jón wrote his poems in a book systematically imitating a printed work with an introduction discussing his work in the context of contemporary literature.

Þorleifsson, Jón. 1825-60

A son of a clergyman, Jón was sent to the grammar school in Reykjavík in 1846. He graduated from the theological college in 1853 and was appointed a clergyman in Fljótshlíð in 1855. A semi-invalid all his life, Jón often suffered physical pain, which is the subject of some of his poetry. On the whole his work reflects deep frustration and sadness. Jón was well read in several languages and clearly had some aspiration as a writer.

He wrote an unfinished novel and poetry, some of which reflects strong influence from Jónas Hallgrímsson.

APPENDIX II

Glossary of Icelandic Terms

1. Amtmaður. In the period 1830 to 1873 there were three amtmenn in Iceland, one for each of the Southern and Western quarters and one for the Northern and Eastern quarters. The amtmaður in the Southern quarter was also the stiftamtmaður, the Crown's highest official and the governor of Iceland. During the period the office was filled by Danes - often of aristocratic families. The amtmenn, the second highest officials in Iceland supervised the sýslumenn.

2. Dróttkvætt, "Skaldic metre", is an ancient Nordic form - the earliest known example is Ragnarsdrápa by Bragi hinn gamli (9th century). Used primarily by court poets until the fourteenth century, the dróttkvæði has a weighty rhythm and ornate language. It was also employed in religious poetry and occasional stanzas. Although the form declined in the later medieval period, its influence did not disappear from Icelandic poetry. The rímur have stylistic features in common with the dróttkvæði, notably kenningar and heiti. The form was used or adapted by the Romantic poets.

3. Fornyrðislag. An Eddic metre which was used by Icelandic poets down the centuries. Its use declined after the Middle Ages, but it was revived in the late eighteenth century by Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal and Jón Þorláksson. Fornyrðislag became one of the more popular metres among the Romantic poets, perhaps because of its lack of strict rhyme. It was used with great success by all the Danish-educated poets, notably in Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Sólarljóð" and Bjarni Thorarensen's obituaries.

4. Heiti. Uncompounded poetic words - i.e. nouns which are not in colloquial use. Heiti were employed by unschooled poets during the nineteenth century, especially in the rímur.

5. Hreppstjóri. A person who administers the hreppur, a geographical unit of administration roughly equivalent to a civil parish. In the nineteenth century a hreppur could have more than one hreppstjóri, who was normally a local farmer appointed by his immediate superior, the sýslumaður, or, less frequently in this period, elected by the inhabitants.

6. Kenningar. A figurative phrase used as a synonym for a simple noun, often picturesque metaphorical compounds. Kenningar were widely used by unschooled poets in the nineteenth century, and were an important characteristic

of the rímur.

7. Lausamenn. Already during the Commonwealth Icelandic law was used to prevent individuals from engaging in peddling, trading or other activity that would free them from working in farming. By the eighteenth century the labour force was traditionally divided into lausamenn and vinnuhjú, - as the term implies the former were exempt from being in permanent employ. Through the centuries the lausamenn were harrassed by legal restrictions which culminated in 1783 when their status was abolished. Over and above the restriction of the settlement laws, the vistaband envisaged that virtually all the Icelandic labour force was permanently contracted to a farmer. This archaic law however was not generally strictly enforced in the nineteenth century.

8. Mansöngur. The beginning section in each ríma in a set of rímur. Initially an address to a lady in the style of courtly love poetry, the mansöngur had changed by the nineteenth century. By this time it functioned as an introduction to the story, but more often poets used the break in the narrative to express ideas of various kinds or to complain about lack of time and interruptions which hindered the progress or quality of their work. Very often a poet would express a personal grievance such as ill-health, poverty, and so on.

9. Rímur. Narrative poems - sometimes called metrical romances - which originated in the fourteenth century. The rímur employ very characteristic metres depending on alliteration and strict rhyme, and a poetic language, namely kenningar and heiti. The rímur usually relate a story from fiction or history - including the Sagas, popular foreign adventures or romances. There are also several nineteenth-century rímur about contemporary events and people. The genre was very popular until its irretrivable decline by the end of the nineteenth century.

10. Sýslumaður. The administrator of the sýsla - there were twenty such districts in the period - the main unit of civil and political administration in Iceland. The sýslumaður was a crown official and by the nineteenth century, a graduate in law.

11. Þjóðskáld. Literally "a national poet". In the nineteenth century the term acquired an association with the Romantic poets and nationalistic poetry. Thus in the introduction to Jón Þorláksson's poetry (1842-43), Jón Sigurðsson argued that because he consciously emulated the ancient Icelandic poets and had a feeling for the native language, Jón truly merited the title þjóðskáld.

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